



**NAVAL  
POSTGRADUATE  
SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**AL QAEDA AND THE ARAB SPRING – AN  
IDEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT**

by

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December 2012

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**REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE**
*Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington DC 20503.

<b>1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)</b>	<b>2. REPORT DATE</b> December 2012	<b>3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED</b> Master's Thesis
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> AL QAEDA AND THE ARAB SPRING – AN IDEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT		<b>5. FUNDING NUMBERS</b>
<b>6. AUTHOR</b> W. Kimball Lewis		
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS</b> Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000		<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>
<b>9. SPONSORING /MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A		<b>10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER</b>

**11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES** The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government. IRB Protocol number N/A.

<b>12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited	<b>12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE</b>
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**13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)**

The Arab Spring of 2011 resulted in widespread unrest as Muslims protested against long-standing, oppressive regimes. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain found themselves at a crossroads between reform and chaos. The Muslim Ummah was ripe for influence from provocative voices such as Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda's rhetoric failed to capitalize on this golden opportunity, however. It issued a number of statements to the people of the Muslim world that demonstrated its inability to find relevance during this time of change. Its narrative of jihad against the "Far Enemy" failed to resonate with Tunisians who sought greater economic opportunity, with Egyptians who wanted greater self-determination, or with Libyans who were joined by Western nations to topple Gaddafi. To Bahrainis, who underwent a struggle for change against King Khalifa and his security forces, Al Qaeda was notably silent. Al Qaeda and its affiliates missed this golden opportunity to reverse the decline in support it had experienced since September 11, 2001. Its statements reveal a lack of new ideas and older ones that are often inconsistent among its affiliates, and expose fissures within the network. As its messaging demonstrates, Al Qaeda likely will experience continued decline and marginalization in the years to come.

<b>14. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Al Qaeda, Arab Spring, Narrative, Ideology, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Zawahiri, Wadoud, Osama bin-Laden, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, terrorist network,		<b>15. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 103	
		<b>16. PRICE CODE</b>	
<b>17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT</b> Unclassified	<b>18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE</b> Unclassified	<b>19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT</b> Unclassified	<b>20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU

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**AL QAEDA AND THE ARAB SPRING – AN IDEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT**

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Major, United States Army  
B.S., Naval Postgraduate School, 2012

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN INFORMATION OPERATIONS**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The Arab Spring of 2011 resulted in widespread unrest as Muslims protested against long-standing, oppressive regimes. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain found themselves at a crossroads between reform and chaos. The Muslim Ummah was ripe for influence from provocative voices such as Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda's rhetoric failed to capitalize on this golden opportunity, however. It issued a number of statements to the people of the Muslim world that demonstrated its inability to find relevance during this time of change. Its narrative of jihad against the “Far Enemy” failed to resonate with Tunisians who sought greater economic opportunity, with Egyptians who wanted greater self-determination, or with Libyans who were joined by Western nations to topple Gaddafi. To Bahrainis, who underwent a struggle for change against King Khalifa and his security forces, Al Qaeda was notably silent. Al Qaeda and its affiliates missed this golden opportunity to reverse the decline in support it had experienced since September 11, 2001. Its statements reveal a lack of new ideas and older ones that are often inconsistent among its affiliates, and expose fissures within the network. As its messaging demonstrates, Al Qaeda likely will experience continued decline and marginalization in the years to come.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Annalise, thank you for your love and support. You have helped me become a better officer and man. Elsa and Ian, I could not be a prouder father. I love you three with all my heart.

Dr. Glenn Robinson and Randy Burkett, thank you for your guidance and expertise. I certainly could not have completed this without you.

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## **I. AL QAEDA AND THE ARAB SPRING – AN IDEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT**

The events in the Middle East, occurring throughout 2011, which have come to be known as the Arab Spring, have extensive and far-reaching implications for the peoples of that region. This includes the Al Qaeda (AQ) terrorist network and what these events mean for it. Because AQ views the toppled military dictatorships as wicked, “tyrannical” regimes, could it be argued that it has achieved a significant victory, now that regime change has occurred?<sup>1</sup> The removal of these apostate regimes as a pathway to the Islamic caliphate is one major aim of AQ. Could it claim any responsibility or involvement in these ousters? Believed by many to be in a state of decline, AQ could view the Arab Spring as an opportunity to prove its relevancy, and thus as an opportunity to broaden its attractiveness as an organization, or it could choose this time in history to alter its rhetoric to appeal to an audience that may be open to the possibility of a new narrative. Now that AQ’s ideological leader Osama bin-Laden and other influential leaders are dead, will this have a bearing on the organization’s direction in light of the Arab Spring?

By examining AQ’s statements since December 2010, this thesis will demonstrate that AQ has tried and failed to remain relevant during this period of relatively nonviolent change. AQ as an organization is declining and represents a much weaker threat to the United States and its Western allies than it once did.<sup>2</sup> This thesis will closely examine the actual statements released and actions taken by AQ to determine whether and how it has modified its traditional narrative to compensate for this diminishing relevancy. The Arab Spring will provide the lens and context for this study.

### **A. WHY DOES THIS MATTER?**

The condition of Al Qaeda and its franchises are important to the United States and its military leaders. After the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the

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<sup>1</sup> Usama bin-Laden, “Message to His Ummah,” *Flashpoint Partners*, May 18, 2011, flashpoint-intel.com.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Robinson, “Jihadi Information Operations” (class lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Calif., December 8, 2011).

Pentagon, the United States spent the next decade seeking to eradicate Al Qaeda from Afghanistan and other safe havens. A significant element of this conflict is the “war of the story,” in which both sides attempt to convince various target audiences that their cause is just.<sup>3</sup> How well does Al Qaeda’s message resonate with the next generation of potential terrorists around the world? Critical to this study is what it says in light of recent occurrences in the Middle East.

The Arab Spring is a unique opportunity to understand how Al Qaeda views these events and itself. It is a moment in time during which popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have sparked significant change throughout the Arab World. The full scope and extent of the consequences of these uprisings may not be determined for many years to come, however, this point in time is crucial to begin answering these questions about an enemy that many consider to be the greatest security risk to the United States. By examining Al Qaeda’s response during this time of change, the United States and its allies can begin to determine how it should adapt its response to Al Qaeda.

## B. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THESIS

Much has been written and said about the causes and the events of the Arab Spring. While Al Qaeda has released a number of statements on countries that experienced regime changes, such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, research and analysis on these statements are not plentiful. This is primarily because it is a recent and ongoing event. It is the intent of this thesis to research, document, and assess whether the Muslim Ummah will choose to support it.

This thesis will consider four case studies of countries that underwent popular uprisings: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain. Al Qaeda issued statements to the people of these nations, with the exception of Bahrain. This exception is significant not only because it issued no statement, but also because Bahrain did not experience regime change. The goal of this thesis is to determine how AQ views the Arab Spring and determine whether its rhetoric in light of these events becomes more moderate, stays the

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<sup>3</sup> John Arquilla, “Warfare in the Information Age” (class lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Calif., July 13, 2011).

same, or becomes more extreme. This research may provide the basis for future study about how the United States chooses to justify the measures it takes to defend against AQ and other perceived terrorist threats.

### C. AL QAEDA'S STRATEGIC THEMES AND NARRATIVES

Al Qaeda, like most terrorist organizations, has a message it wants the world to receive. There are six “master narratives” with accompanying themes, which it incorporates into its statements. These themes reveal its objectives to the world.<sup>4</sup> It is important to briefly outline these themes before examining the messages Al Qaeda sent to the people during the Arab Spring. Doing so will provide a base line of issues that were important to Al Qaeda at the time demonstrations began in Tunisia. The master narratives are: War on Islam, Agents of the West, The Nakba, Violent Jihad, Blood of the Martyrs, and Restoring the Caliphate.<sup>5</sup>

Al Qaeda's first strategic narrative is “War on Islam,” and it states that Islam is and always has been under attack by non-Muslims. Al Qaeda and other Islamic groups frequently use the term infidel, or unbeliever, to designate non-Muslims. These enemies surround the Ummah, or the body of believers, and represent a constant threat as they seek to deceive it into adopting a more moderate form of Islam. Al Qaeda insists it is the duty of every Muslim to “take up arms alongside their fellow *mujahidin* and prepare themselves for the call to jihad.”<sup>6</sup> This narrative contains themes of enemy encirclement, conspiracy, and humiliation.

The next narrative Al Qaeda uses is “The Agents of the West.” This highlights Al Qaeda’s belief that present rulers and those recently deposed, such as in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and elsewhere, have betrayed the example of the dedicated leaders of early Islam. These early leaders loved Sharia, rejected worldly excesses, and lived piously. In contrast, leaders of today are hypocritical, “ignoring Sharia, stealing their peoples’

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<sup>4</sup> “Al-Qaeda Master Narratives and Affiliate Case Studies: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb,” Public Intelligence, last modified June 12, 2012, [publicintelligence.net/osc-al-qaeda-master-narratives/](http://publicintelligence.net/osc-al-qaeda-master-narratives/).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

wealth, and spreading idleness.”<sup>7</sup> Particularly key to Al Qaeda is its belief that Western masters, especially the United States, control these leaders. The Ummah must wake up and free itself from corruption and oppression. This narrative has the themes of conspiracy, apostasy, and corruption.

The third narrative is called “The Nakba,” which means catastrophe, and involves Israel. Al Qaeda considers Israel an abomination that must be swept from the Muslim holy land.<sup>8</sup> It believes that there is a holocaust taking place in Gaza, which is perpetuated and concealed by false peace treaties and corrupted Arab leaders. It calls upon all Muslims to rise up against Israel to redress this injustice, and return the holy land to its people. Doing so will deliver retribution for the many injustices the Ummah has suffered at the hands of Israel. Themes in this narrative include humiliation, tragedy, justice, occupation, and oppression.

“Violent Jihad” is perhaps Al Qaeda’s most well-known narrative. Very simply, Muslims can either “let the house of Islam burn to the ground or rise up to defend it.”<sup>9</sup> Muslims are a peace-loving people, but Muhammad and his companions did not shirk their duty to fight when necessary. Today, Al Qaeda insists that the people of Islam and its leaders have sought money and stability before God and their religious obligation to defend the faith. Jihad has two meanings. One is an internal, spiritual struggle to live piously according to the dictates of Islam. The other is an external struggle that obligates Muslims to fight either individually when summoned, or collectively against a foreign threat. Al Qaeda has claimed that each Muslim has an individual duty to engage in violent, external jihad. Themes associated with this narrative include survival, duty and obligation, and retaliation.

Al Qaeda’s narrative, “Blood of the Martyrs,” is closely associated with violent jihad. This narrative reminds Muslims that in Muhammad’s day, the mujahidin were steadfast in the face of death, willing to charge into battle to defend Islam against its

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

enemies.<sup>10</sup> Today, this narrative asserts that the Ummah has forgotten this, and that the way to victory over its enemies is through martyrdom and sacrifice. Al Qaeda urges Muslims to recommit themselves to self-sacrifice through themes of obligation and a righteous cause.

Another of Al Qaeda's most notable narratives is its goal of "Restoring the Caliphate." This narrative has its basis in early Islamic history, as it was the establishment of an Islamic caliphate that brought order and enlightenment to lost desert tribes.<sup>11</sup> It turned them into leaders, scholars, and champions of monotheism. Over the centuries, Western influence and attacks divided the Ummah into many pieces, causing the caliphate to be destroyed. In place of this, the West installed leaders who were traitorous Muslim rulers. This glorious caliphate can be restored through Muslim blood and arms. Doing so will end injustice and restore the Ummah to its former majesty. This narrative appeals to a Muslim's sense of revival, unity, and victory, urging him to participate in this restoration.

Nearly all of the statements released since Al Qaeda's inception contain elements of one or all of these narratives. Its messages are often long, verbose, and difficult to understand after translation from Arabic. This is especially true for non-Muslim, Westerners. Becoming familiar with its narratives will enable anyone to quickly and easily recognize them within the context of Al Qaeda statements. They are readily apparent in the declarations released before the Arab Spring, and will stand out in statements released during and after. Any adjustments to these narratives will be all-the-more apparent. Any changes to them are indicators that Al Qaeda is seeking to find a narrative that will resonate with its target audiences. The target audiences are the populations it needs for support.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

#### D. THE ARAB SPRING IN PERSPECTIVE

At face value, one could conclude that the toppling of “apostate regimes” from the Middle East and North Africa is a victory for Al Qaeda.<sup>12</sup> If the ultimate goal of AQ is to return countries such as Egypt back to Muslims to be ruled by a caliphate, then the removal of these regimes might be considered significant progress to that end. It was the jihadist’s inability to successfully defeat such governments in the first place that caused AQ to turn its attention to defeating the United States and the West.

AQ and its leaders believed these regimes were too difficult to defeat for two main reasons. First, it perceived the United States as too powerful an ally to these governments, making them too difficult to overcome. It observed that the United States would never allow these “puppet” dictators to fail, as long as there were oil and other resources to be had, and as long as it could manipulate Arab-Israeli relations. The second reason could be attributed to the challenge and time it would take to stage internal military coups, such as the one Ayman Zawahiri wanted to orchestrate in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, taking the fight to the “Far Enemy” seemed the most plausible option.

For these reasons, AQ built a movement and ideology dedicated to taking this fight directly to the United States and the West. This movement was never as popular within the Islamic community at large as some Westerners may believe. Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, and others have always struggled against regional, not global, enemies. AQ did have some success, however, which facilitated this belief. The most notable were the Sept. 11 attacks, and the USS Cole and East Africa bombings. Since that time, AQ has been driven and defeated to the point that now it exists in small, loosely affiliated networks, scattered throughout the Middle East, and Africa, with larger concentrations in Yemen.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xi.

<sup>13</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 121.

<sup>14</sup>“Al Qaeda,” Jane’s World Insurgency and Terrorism, last modified October 29, 2012. <https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=Reference&ItemId=+++1320791&Pubabbrev=JWIT>.

## E. IMPLICATIONS FOR AL QAEDA

As citizens throughout the Middle East rose up against these “apostate” regimes in December 2010, it would seem that AQ’s shared hatred against the dictators and their secular governments might resonate with the people. Some wondered whether the people would support governments ruled by Islamic clerics, as in Iran. These events could represent an opportunity for AQ to reverse its decline and achieve broader appeal, however, current research and indicators suggest that this is not the case.<sup>15</sup>

Since the events of the Arab Spring are still unresolved at this writing, it remains to be seen what kinds of governments will emerge in these countries. Leading experts posit it will take as many as 80 years or more to settle these questions. Eastern Europe is still resolving similar challenges after more than 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>16</sup> AQ still remains a player in the region, and does not want to see liberal democracies emerge in these countries. It is vital to know what AQ has said, and how it has responded to these proceedings.

Contrary to what AQ would hope for in a potential target audience, the primary motivation for the uprisings in the Middle East has been rooted in a more secular than religious nature. The average Muslim who demonstrated in the streets of Cairo was more concerned with basic human rights and how to provide the necessities of life for his family. People there want the right to participate in the political process, to have a voice in government, to be free from a corrupt system that favors a small, wealthy elite that is loyal only to the reigning regime.<sup>17</sup> How will AQ address the true people’s true concerns, which have far less to do with Islam, than with how people will provide for themselves and their place in the political process? The Arab Spring appears to have caught AQ off guard, without an appealing response to these concerns.

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<sup>15</sup> Juan C. Zarate and David A. Gordon, “The Battle for Reform with Al-Qaeda,” *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 104, accessed November 29, 2011, [http://www.twq.com/11summer/docs/11summer\\_Zarate\\_Gordon.pdf](http://www.twq.com/11summer/docs/11summer_Zarate_Gordon.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Gerges, Fawaz “The Arab Spring: What Was/Is it, and Why did it Occur.” Presentation at the Arab Spring Symposium, The United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Penn., January 30, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Initial research reveals some compelling evidence that Al Qaeda continues to find relevancy difficult. For example, it embraces demonstrations and encourages Muslims to continue to do so, yet it denounces the democratic process the demonstrators demand. It continues to declare democracy as heretical and promotes a strictly Islamic interpretation of government, which would fail to provide the freedom and economic prosperity demanded by the people.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, it has traditionally advocated violent action to achieve political goals, and continues to do so today.

In an apparent attempt to gain favor among the people, AQ parroted the words of Islamic leaders who do seem to have influence and popularity.<sup>19</sup> One key ideologue was, of course, Sayyid Qutb. He wrote and spoke out sharply against the Nasser regime in Egypt. His ideas and themes have been widely embraced by violent extremists for generations. Another influential ideologue, living today, is Yusuf Qaradawi. He is an immensely popular cleric from Qatar who encouraged Muslims not to allow their revolution to be “stolen.” Al Qaeda adopted this and other themes in its statements after Qaradawi’s famous speech in Cairo on February 18, 2011. Co-opting themes from the writings and words of these and other Muslim leaders demonstrates an inability to generate new ideas, and Al Qaeda’s need to attach itself in some way to popular leaders.

One leading expert, Fawaz Gerges, argues that AQ’s “narrative continues to resonate both with ordinary Americans and with top military commanders in charge of national security.”<sup>20</sup> Al Qaeda remains high on the list of threats to the United States, and the 24-hour news media still highlight any attack associated with Al Qaeda, no matter how small its size. In reality, after more than 10 years of war in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and elsewhere, Al Qaeda is dwindling in numbers and support, and its goals of achieving an Islamic caliphate seem to be largely unpopular. Most Muslims would

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<sup>18</sup> “Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5,” Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda* (New York: The Oxford University Press, 2011), 19.

like to practice their religion as they see fit but seem to be less interested in living under an Islamic caliphate. The forces behind the revolts of the Arab Spring do not appear to mesh with AQ's goals.

## F. METHODOLOGY

This thesis will focus primarily on the words and rhetoric of Al Qaeda Central, which will be referred to simply as Al Qaeda throughout. This is the organization from which all other affiliates have sprung or received their inspiration. Al Qaeda Central presently resides in the unstable region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri has acted as its primary spokesman, now that Osama bin-Laden is dead, and much of this thesis will use Zawahiri's words. When related Al Qaeda affiliates, such as Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), address a country, it will be noted as such. It is important to include these affiliates because they are related to Al Qaeda Central. Their words are equally as important to study, and will at times reveal conflicts between their ideology and that of Al Qaeda central.

Each chapter will be a case study of a particular country, starting with Tunisia, and followed by Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain. Other countries, and particularly Syria, are excluded from this study because the uprisings are still largely ongoing, and the former regimes remain. Much of this thesis will consist of primary research. It includes translated statements made by Al Qaeda and other key leaders throughout the Middle East. They will relate directly to the uprisings within the specific countries. Each case study will offer a brief description of the events and key issues in the country, to provide a point of reference from which to present Al Qaeda's statements. Following the statements, analysis will highlight consistencies or discrepancies with traditional narrative and themes. More importantly, the statements will reveal whether Al Qaeda has adopted new themes, or changed its narrative to appeal to the motivations of the people.

The Arab Spring, an inherently social revolution, lends itself to comparative case study analysis. Is there one Arab Spring or many Arab Springs? Because of the rapid spread of information and rise of awareness through the 24-hour news media, Internet,

and social media, this study will assume that there was only one major event called the Arab Spring. The basis for this is due to its occurrence in different countries within a short time frame, and for many of the same reasons. As news of the uprisings occurring in neighboring countries rapidly made its way from Tunisia to Egypt and elsewhere, people took to the streets in protest. This study is not intended to answer the question of one or many Arab Springs. Therefore, it will use the “cross case study” method, similar to that outlined by Alexander George and Andrew Bennett in their book, “Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences.”

The time to gather valuable information is now, while the events are still fresh. The potential risk is that the information collected becomes outdated as further events unfold. Therefore, the parameters of this topic are intentionally focused on depth, across a relatively narrow scope, rather than breadth across the entire Middle East. The selected case-study countries represent among the most important countries in the Middle East, according to Al Qaeda. And, they are selected because they also endured the greatest instances of turmoil in the Arab Spring.

## **G. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The background knowledge for this thesis was gained through reading and discussion. First, the readings for a class taken at the Naval Postgraduate School entitled “Jihadi Information Operations” were critical to gaining the basis for terrorist ideology in the Middle East. Other instructors’ classes and guest lecturers added to the base of knowledge. Second, briefings and presentations received by subject matter experts about the Arab Spring held at the U.S. Army War College and the U.S. State Department broadened this base knowledge of ideology. This put Al Qaeda’s ideology in the context of the Arab Spring. Third, the material, statements, and supporting documents that make up the nexus of this research were gathered from various Internet sources.

The class readings that formed the base of knowledge for this thesis come from the NPS class “Jihadi Information Operations.” The books for the class were as follows:

Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. Cambridge, 2005.

Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words*. Harvard, 2008.

John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*. Gallup Press, 2007.

Jim Lacey, ed., *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad; Deciphering Abu Musab al-Suri's Islamic Jihad Manifesto*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008.

Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, *Self-Inflicted Wounds* (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point, 2010).

This thesis cites every one of these books and authors. In addition to these works, the following sources contribute to baseline knowledge though they are not cited:

Glenn E. Robinson, “Jihadi Information Strategy: Sources, Opportunities and Vulnerabilities,” in Arquilla and Borer, eds., *Information Strategy and Warfare*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007. ®

Yvonne Y. Haddad, “Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival” ®

Gregory Rose, “*Velayat-e Faqih* and the Recovery of Islamic Identity in the Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini” ®

Ellis Goldberg, “Smashing Idols and the State: The Protestant Ethic and Egyptian Sunni Radicalism” ®

Ahmad Moussalli, “Wahhabism, Salafism, and Islamism: Who is the Enemy?”®

Gambetta and Hertog, “Engineers of Jihad” ®

Rudolph Peters, *Jihad: An Introduction* ®

Patricia Crone, *Jihad: Idea and History* ®

The writings of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, and, of course, Osama bin-Laden himself provided a baseline ideology to compare future statements. Reading and understanding the correspondence between other terrorists such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Al Qaeda leaders provided insights into potential schisms in the organization.

A key element to understanding the subject matter about the Arab Spring was gained by attending a series of lectures held in January 2012 at the U.S. Army War

College. Among the speakers was Dr. David Sorensen, professor of International Security Studies at the Air War College, Dr. Glenn Robinson, professor at the Naval Post Graduate School, and Dr. Fawaz Gerges, professor of Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Dr. Gerges is cited within this thesis based on his extensive knowledge and work with actual Al Qaeda members. His book, “The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda,” published in 2011, contains research that provides direct information relating to the subject matter of this thesis. Briefings received at the U.S. State Department in September 2012 verified the findings of this research.

Finally, the research and sources found through Internet websites proved critical. Much of this material is not available in printed book form. Some of the sources are from scholarly journals, such as the “The Battle for Reform with Al-Qaeda,” by Juan C. Zarate and David A. Gordon, found in The Washington Quarterly in the summer of 2011. This work is useful and cited in Chapter III of this thesis. Most important are the words of Al Qaeda leaders themselves, which can be found in articles from an online magazine released by AQ called “Inspire” magazine. This magazine is printed in English for Western audiences and is published by the Al-Malahem Media Foundation by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

So far, there are seven editions to this magazine, published since the summer of 2010 through September 2011. The most significant edition was published in the spring of 2011, and it features “The Tsunami of Change” on the front cover. This edition contains a long article by Zawahiri that addresses the people of the Middle East about the uprisings in various countries. There also are a number of articles written by Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born cleric who joined Al Qaeda and inspired terrorist activity all over the world, and who was later killed in a drone strike in Yemen in September 2011. *Inspire* magazine has provided a valuable window into how Al Qaeda and its various leaders view the Arab Spring.

Two other notable web sources are *Flashpoint Partners*, an online source for statements released by terrorist organizations, and *Open Source.Gov*. These were particularly useful in locating statements by Zawahiri and other Al Qaeda leaders.

*Open Source.Gov* requires an account. The bibliography at the end is a list of sources used both for preparation and within the thesis. All sources are openly available; therefore, it is an unclassified study.

Much has been written about Al Qaeda, its leaders and the Arab Spring in books, scholarly journals, and Internet databases. This thesis attempts to bring together the two subjects as a way to examine Al Qaeda's narrative through the lens of the Arab Spring, and sources that directly address the melding of the two subjects are not as readily available. As the implications of the Arab Spring unfold, more will be written.

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## **II. TUNISIA: SPARK OF THE ARAB SPRING**

On December 17, 2010, a young fruit-seller named Mohamed Bouazizi doused himself in paint thinner and set himself on fire in front of the government building in Sidi Bouzid. This act sparked protests; known in Tunisia as the Jasmine Revolution, they led Tunisian president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali to step down from the seat of power he had held since 1987.<sup>21</sup> Bouazizi's suicidal act sparked uprisings throughout the Middle East and North Africa, resulting in complete regime change in countries such as Egypt and Libya in less than a year. This simple, individual, and tragic act exemplifies the basis for the Arab Spring movement. Those who took to the streets did so personal reasons, and not strictly because of a desire for an Islamic expression of governance. They did it to gain basic human rights and enjoy a voice in government. Above all, they wanted economic freedom and opportunity.

As Ben Ali's government and others collapsed, a long-awaited opportunity to achieve dramatic change in the government of a vulnerable country emerged. These events could represent a colossal windfall for Al Qaeda if it can successfully craft a narrative that appeals to the people. In Tunisia, however, it has failed to do so. Its message does not recognize the simple, economically motivated grievances of its people. It has missed a golden opportunity to gain their support. Even though its two messages to Tunisia contain rhetoric that could potentially appeal to its people, it appears to undermine its own message by falling back on its traditional theme of violent jihad. Additionally, Al Qaeda continues to focus on its anti-American, anti-Western themes, renouncing democracy and capitalism, and appeals to the people of Islam and Tunisia to embrace Islamic rule. These themes lack appeal outside of the most radicalized terrorist networks. Al Qaeda persists in this narrative regardless of its numerous failures following the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. These failings include being driven from Afghanistan, fractures within its organization in Iraq, the death of Osama

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<sup>21</sup> “Tunisian President Goes into Exile,” [janes.ihs.com](https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=++1299301&Pubabbrev=JIWK), last modified January 17 2011, <https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=++1299301&Pubabbrev=JIWK>.

bin-Laden and other key leaders, and ultimately its failure to achieve success on the scale it reached on Sept. 11. As Al Qaeda adheres to its failing narrative strategy, its numbers and influence seem destined to decline, and the Muslims throughout the world will reject it.

#### A. WHAT TUNISIANS WANT

Before exploring Al Qaeda’s statements about Tunisia, it is important to note how this country functioned as a nation under Ben Ali at the start of the protests. First, he stepped into power in 1987 after being appointed Prime Minister of Tunisia by President Habib Bourguiba in October of that year. The following month, he rose to the presidency in a nonviolent coup after a doctor declared Bourguiba medically unfit to stand as president. Since that time, he has won “elections” with overwhelming majorities, often of 90% or greater, prompting criticisms of their legitimacy.<sup>22</sup> At times, Ben Ali has been criticized for human rights violations, such as suppression of members of the press who were critical of him and his regime. He also harassed and imprisoned political opponents, particularly Islamist organizations such as An-Nahda, whose leaders were forced into exile in London and Paris.<sup>23</sup> According to Al Qaeda, Ben Ali presided over an “apostate regime,” and referred to him as “one of today’s Pharaohs, and one of the biggest criminals who were posted by the Crusaders in our countries.”<sup>24</sup>

Tunisia’s economic woes are a direct result of the replacement of the nation-state with a “mafia family” system. Ben Ali’s family, inner circle, and closely associated network of supporters have siphoned the wealth of Tunisia. This translates into “crony capitalism,” a system of ruling elite who are all closely linked with Ben Ali. Within this system, his supporters hold all the power and resources, with little to no trickle-down

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<sup>22</sup> “Tunisia Elects Ben Ali for a Fifth Term,” [jane's.ihs.com](https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=++1296822&Pubabbrev=JIWK), last modified October 27, 2009, <https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=++1296822&Pubabbrev=JIWK>.

<sup>23</sup> “Rebel Rousers – Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution,” [jane's.ihs.com](https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=+++1196151&Pubabbrev=JIR), last modified February 18, 2011, <https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=+++1196151&Pubabbrev=JIR>.

<sup>24</sup> “Support and Affirmation for the Uprising of Our People in Tunisia,” [flashpoint-intel.com](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_aqimtunisia0111.pdf), last modified January 13, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_aqimtunisia0111.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_aqimtunisia0111.pdf)

effect. Those without financial resources cannot get a business started, and those who have prospering businesses continue to prosper at the pleasure of the regime. All others continue to sink into poverty.<sup>25</sup>

This economic disparity is noted by the U.S. State Department. The U.S. embassy in Tunis describes the Ben Ali family as a “quasi mafia.” It noted that:

Seemingly half of the Tunisian business community can claim a Ben Ali connection through marriage, and many of these relations are reported to have made the most of their lineage. With Tunisians facing a rising inflation and high unemployment, the conspicuous displays of wealth and persistent rumours of corruption have added fuel to the fire.<sup>26</sup>

As in other regional countries such as Egypt, job creation has not kept pace with the number of college graduates. During his tenure, Ben Ali boosted the college and university attendance to a large degree during his tenure. Since entry into the work force is limited to those possessing wealth and means, or to those who have a close connection to the Ben Ali family, the number of unemployed continues to increase. Tunisians between the ages of 15 and 29 experience an unemployment rate of 30%.<sup>27</sup> There are simply not enough jobs or wealth to support the population.

In addition to the inherent economic disparity between the regime supporters and the rest of the population, the Tunisian government normally reacts in a heavy-handed manner to unrest. Ben Ali’s response to the uprisings was insensitive at best, and brutal at worst. He made a special trip to visit Bouazizi in the hospital as a display of compassion for the plight of the unemployed, oppressed workers. He did this after more uprisings erupted, and additional people immolated themselves or otherwise committed suicide in protest. Then, when it appeared that there would be no end to the protests, he denounced them, claiming that they would negatively impact the country’s tourism industry. Finally, when this discouragement failed, Ben Ali declared, “the law will be

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<sup>25</sup> Fawaz Gerges, “Context of the Drivers of the Awakenings” (presentation, Arab Spring Symposium, Carlisle Barracks, Penn., January 30–31, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Julian Borger, “Tunisian President Vows to Punish Rioters After Worst Unrest in a Decade,” *The Guardian*, last modified December 29, 2010, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/29/tunisian-president-vows-punish-rioters](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/29/tunisian-president-vows-punish-rioters)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

applied in all firmness,” adding that its enforcement would be targeted at “a minority of extremists and mercenaries who resort to violence and disorder.”<sup>28</sup> Government clashes with protesters resulted in dozens of civilian deaths. To appease Tunisians, Ben Ali reported that he would not seek re-election. When this failed to satisfy the demands of the people that he step down, he declared a state of emergency. Finally, he handed power over to vice president Mohammed Ghannouchi, and on January 14, 2011, fled with his family to Saudi Arabia.<sup>29</sup>

Tunisia’s economic and political environment sparked outrage among the youth. Mohamed Bouazizi’s death resonated with them because he was a repressed entrepreneur.<sup>30</sup> He was prohibited from operating his meager fruit-selling business without the license required to operate on the streets of Sidi Bouzid. Police confiscated his produce cart, along with his scales, and other expensive business capital. Finally, they refused his 10-dinar fine for the violation.<sup>31</sup> The costs associated with a license, business capital, bribes, fines, and other obstacles to self-employment were more than Bouazizi could bear.

The first-hand accounts of the protesters verify the impact Tunisian “crony capitalism” had on the young, working-age men and women. A young lawyer living in Mohamed Bouazizi’s neighborhood expressed his feelings in this way:

We were silent before but Mohammed showed us that we must react. My brother has a Ph.D.; he works in a supermarket. The problem is that qualifications mean nothing. It’s all about who you know. Now, we expect things to change. I want my freedom and my rights. I want to work. I want a job.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> “Tunisian President Goes into Exile,” [jane's.ihs.com](http://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=++1299301&Pubabbrev=JIWK), last modified January 17, 2011, [https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=++1299301&Pubabbrev=JIWK](http://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=++1299301&Pubabbrev=JIWK).

<sup>30</sup> Hernando De Soto, “The Real Mohamed Bouazizi,” *Foreign Policy*, last modified December 16, 2011, [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/16/the\\_real\\_mohamed\\_bouazizi](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/16/the_real_mohamed_bouazizi)

<sup>31</sup> Rania Abouzeid, “Bouazizi: The Man Who Set Himself and Tunisia on Fire,” *Time Magazine World*, last modified January 21, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2044723,00.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

This statement highlights the plight of young Tunisians; college graduates are qualified for higher paying jobs, but few are available to those without a connection to the Ben Ali inner circle. Other unemployed men state that they do not want to rely on bribes or political favors to get jobs. One college graduate said, “I’m an IT graduate and I have been unemployed for four years because I don’t know anyone in the municipality. What is my future? We are all Bouazizis if our hopes are dashed.”<sup>33</sup> These statements capture the true sentiment felt by young Tunisians.

A critical element generally present in the Arab Spring, and particularly in Tunisia, is the role of “agency.” This refers to the control citizens have over their own lives and destiny. It speaks to their desire to be free from governmental interference. Why has this movement taken so long to emerge? Tunisia, as well as Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and other nations of the Middle East and North Africa have been under military or other regime rule for generations. Before this, Tunisia was part of the Ottoman Empire. The uprisings have spread quickly across Tunisia and throughout most of the Muslim world.

This role of “agency,” or the idea of self-determination, has boiled over. A “psychological rapture” has taken hold and continues in spite of the killings inflicted on Tunisians by their government. It is a feeling Muslims have as they witness oppressive regimes collapse and see the potential for true self-determination. This region has been under authoritarian rule since the beginning of the Ottoman Empire, followed by foreign imperialism, and finally military dictatorships. Now that Ben Ali and others have relinquished power, it can be said that for the first time in more than 600 years, many Muslims feel free.<sup>34</sup> This feeling is evident in the banners on display in Tunisia that state: “We are all prepared to sacrifice our blood for the people.”<sup>35</sup> Tunisians did just that, as Ben Ali made good on his threat to apply the law with all firmness.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>34</sup> Fawaz Gerges, “Context of the Drivers of the Awakenings” (presentation, Arab Spring Symposium, Carlisle Barracks, PA, January 30–31, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Rania Abouzeid, “Bouazizi: The Man Who Set Himself and Tunisia on Fire,” *Time Magazine World*, last modified January 21, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2044723,00.html>.

Briefly exploring the recent socioeconomic history of Tunisia, and the sentiment expressed by its young working class provides relevant and necessary insight as to what matters most to them. This is a group, along with the greater population of Tunisia, which has reached the end of its willingness to tolerate an oppressive regime. Tunisians are clearly concerned with their rights, role in the democratic process, and especially economic opportunity. Al Qaeda on the other hand, will demonstrate its inability to read these signals, and will respond by using its long-standing narrative, encouraging Tunisians to join it in violent jihad.

## **B. WHAT AL QAEDA WANTS**

The desire for economic opportunity and political freedom in Tunisia is evident, however, Al Qaeda does not acknowledge this, and instead, it seeks to draw attention to its cause. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) made a few statements regarding the events in Tunisia. Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, as its mouthpiece, released the first one on January 13, 2011, weeks after the commencement of unrest. AQIM released the second statement on January 26, 2011. This slow-to-respond manner is an indication that it needed to judge the outcome of events, and more importantly that it was unprepared to respond to them in the first place. In fact, it did not publish its first statement until the collapse of Ben Ali's government was imminent; he fled the country the next day, January 14, 2011.

In the Jan. 13 statement, Wadoud outlines four key “facts.” First, he identifies Ben Ali as one of today’s pharaohs. Second, that violent jihad is the way to freedom. Third, he discusses money that he says is “stolen” by the Tunisian regime from its people. And fourth, he frames the struggle in Tunisia within a greater context of struggle against the Far Enemy. It is worthy to note that Al Qaeda in some instances does directly address the grievances of the Tunisian people. These include a shared hatred of Ben Ali, with his corrupt regime and the economic disparity between it and the people. Al Qaeda also appeals to the average Muslim’s desire to live piously, as a majority of them do support a role for Sharia as a source of legislation, though not in the same overarching

sense that Al Qaeda espouses.<sup>36</sup> These lines of reasoning could potentially gain it some Tunisian support, but as will be shown, are ultimately to be subverted by its own harsh rhetoric.

Point number one of Wadoud's statement labels Ben Ali "one of today's Pharaohs and one of the biggest criminals who were posted by the Crusaders in our countries, in order to continue slaughtering the Ummah and skinning it from the faith on behalf of them."<sup>37</sup> There is little doubt that many Tunisians would agree with Wadoud that Ben Ali was a criminal who oppressed them. However, it appears that Wadoud also seeks to appeal to a hatred of the Crusaders, or in other words, the United States and the West. At no time were the protests in Tunisia concerned with this Far Enemy. Continuing, he states that the Ben Ali regime was guilty of

prohibiting the Hajj, and prohibiting al-Hijab (woman veil) and fighting everything that smells like Islam, and torturing and forcing the Muslim youth into the forgotten prisons, and violating the honors of the pure, chaste women.<sup>38</sup>

This passage highlights Al Qaeda's continual fixation on renouncing anything of a secular nature. Wadoud includes a castigation of the Jews and the Christians in Tunisia, saying that under Ben Ali's regime they "were glorified, while the Muslims were degraded and humiliated."<sup>39</sup>

Fact one of Wadoud's message does contain wording that could appeal directly to the people's grievances against Ben Ali. Wadoud says that the regime "violated the people's lives and enslaved them."<sup>40</sup> Few in Tunisia would disagree with this. Ben Ali and his inner circle

monopolized the wealth, so they stole the countries' resources and caused millions of Muslims to starve and become impoverished, and they gagged

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<sup>36</sup> John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 63.

<sup>37</sup> "Support and Affirmation for the Uprising of our People in Tunisia," flashpoint-intel.com, last modified January 13, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_aqimtunisia0111.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_aqimtunisia0111.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

and forbade them from all the fundamentals of freedom and righteous living. From the results of his criminal policies were millions of unemployed and crushed poor. In short, Tunisia's tyrant has neither life nor religion.<sup>41</sup>

This passage is a possible start to gaining some relevancy by directly echoing the sentiment of the oppressed Tunisians. Its mention of the tyrant having neither “life nor religion” does have an appeal. The average Muslim truly does wish to live a life in accordance with Islamic principles, in a “Sharia light” sense.<sup>42</sup> That is, Sharia law would be a guiding principle in issues such as marriage, divorce, adoption, and other family matters. However, Al Qaeda’s vision of Sharia law more closely follows the oppressive, intrusive vision espoused by groups such as the Taliban, who supported Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda hints at this vision with its religious undertones throughout point one of this message, and by doing so, undermines its own ability to garner support for itself.

The second fact within Al Qaeda’s first message addresses the well-known concept of jihad. In most rhetoric throughout its existence, Al Qaeda refers to the lesser, or violent jihad. This type of jihad specifies the obligation of all Muslims to actively defend Muslim lands from external invaders. When Wadoud speaks of jihad in this point, he is talking about this external jihad against the enemies of Islam. This is the violent jihad, not the internal struggle to live according to God’s law. He states, “Jihad and resistance against injustice are the definite way in Sharia and in rationality for salvation.”<sup>43</sup> In keeping with the definition of this external struggle, he admonishes Tunisians:

In order for your movement to be fruitful, it shouldn’t be limited to one city or one front, but the duty is to extend it to all the sides of the country

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Glenn Robinson, “Class lecture on Zawahiri” (presentation at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Calif., October 27, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> “Support and Affirmation for the Uprising of our People in Tunisia,” flashpoint-intel.com, last modified January 13, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_aqimtunisia0111.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_aqimtunisia0111.pdf)

and its corners and valleys, because the tyrant is able to extinguish any uprising by a limited sect from the nation, but he has no control over the entire nation.<sup>44</sup>

This appeal to violent jihad does not resonate though, given that the Arab Spring in Tunisia was a non-violent movement. Though some see suicide as a violent act, the non-violent preference of the Tunisian youth is evident in the willingness of individuals to commit suicide in protest, rather than take up arms against the government. They are not going to join Al Qaeda in its version of jihad.

At the same time Al Qaeda urges Tunisians to take up the lesser, violent jihad, it also makes a reference to the more widely known concept of the greater jihad: the internal struggle. The greater jihad refers to a Muslim's efforts to live a pious life in keeping with the tenets of the faith and God's law. Muslims are generally more acquainted with this concept than they are of the external jihad, which is espoused by Al Qaeda and other violent extremist groups. Practicing Muslims live the inner, greater Jihad daily. Wadoud states:

Jihad and resistance against injustice are the definite way in Sharia an in rationality for salvation. And sacrifice is the inevitable and certain price. [Poetry] and, the oppression of this apostate, traitor regime isn't the kind that should be countered with contingency and patience, but it is the kind of oppression that must be removed with all kinds of refutation including Jihad with the soul.<sup>45</sup>

The jihad of the soul is an appeal to the greater struggle for pious living. It invokes an internal, spiritual element of the outward uprisings taking place. Given the self-sacrificing, personal struggle of the youth in Tunisia against the Ben Ali regime, Al Qaeda would likely achieve a more favorable view by incorporating this aspect into its narrative than a continual emphasis on violent jihad.

Wadoud's third fact is an appeal to the people's sense of injustice at the recurrent loss of their wealth and opportunity. He declares that their money is:

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Either stolen and taken by the president's gang and his staff and family, or spoiled and spent on dancing parties, profligate festivals and all kinds of play. All of that within a well-studied and intentional policy to corrupt the morale of the youth and deter them from their religion; as there is no development in Tunisia except projects of corruption, preoccupation and spread of sins in the Muslim Tunisian society.<sup>46</sup>

This statement intermingles elements of a Muslim's desire to live piously, axioms of Islam, appeals to the tenets of the faith, as well as to Tunisians' anger toward Ben Ali and his inner circle. It is a good appeal to the root causes of the uprisings: an unfair balance of power, squandering of resources, and the siphoning off of wealth. Stating that the regime uses the money to corrupt the youth and dissuade them from their religion is a moderate appeal. This, and the assertion that government corruption is instrumental in spreading sin throughout Tunisian society, is more enticing when compared to taking up arms, denouncing democracy, or installing an Islamic caliphate. The average Tunisian is concerned with living according to his faith as a Muslim, and this point within Al Qaeda's message would not be considered offensive or extreme. This kind of rhetoric could gain some traction with Tunisians, but Al Qaeda will continue to proceed down the path of a violent narrative in its next point.

The fourth and final fact in Al Qaeda's first official statement to Tunisia during the Arab Spring completely obliterates any moderate, potentially appealing tones it may have achieved in the first three points. Wadoud states:

Neither freedom nor justice will be achieved except with the rise of a Muslim government that takes care of rights, protects honors, spreads justice and applies Shura, and this government won't rise except through Jihad against the Crusaders and Jews. And removing their governing traitor cooperatives from the likes of Ibn Ali and Boutaflqa and Muhammad the Sixth, and al-Qaddafi and others.<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, Al Qaeda seeks to frame the struggles in Tunisia within the greater context of the "general battle the Muslim Ummah is engaged in against its external and domestic enemies."<sup>48</sup> Contrary to the average Tunisian Muslim's desire to live according to his

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

beliefs, Wadoud takes the idea to the extreme, stating that establishing Sharia is part of this greater battle within the Middle East.

The remainder of the message expounds upon the obligation that Tunisians have to continue to resist on behalf of those in Sidi Bouzid. Instead of replacing the Ben Ali regime with some sort of representative form of democracy, it should be replaced with Islamic rule, which would restore the pride and dignity of the people. Wadoud attempts to co-opt the spirit of the movement:

And if you want to die endeared and resisters against malevolence, and Mujahideen against the Tunisian tyrant and his masters, with all of the available possible means, is a thousand times better than the life of humiliation, and cowardice.<sup>49</sup>

This passage suggests an armed, violent overthrow of the government in the style of the fighting Mujahideen. Unfortunately for Al Qaeda, by the time this statement was released, Ben Ali and his regime were in the throes of collapse by peaceful means and sheer will of the people.

The most incongruous expression in Message One to the Tunisian people seems to indicate that Al Qaeda is willing to intervene directly in its affairs. Wadoud tells the people to send its “sons to us to train on weapons and gain military expertise in order to engage in decisive battle with the Jews and the Christians and their cooperatives who oppress you.”<sup>50</sup> This is a specific request for an ambiguous purpose. Al Qaeda concludes its first message by indicating support to the people of Tunisia, telling them that their problems are Al Qaeda’s problems, that it “will take revenge against your prosecutors and their masters sooner or later.” Polling data, presented later, suggest that this type of message is unlikely to appeal to Tunisians who are interested in finding jobs and opportunities for prosperity. It seems the Tunisians already were successful in taking revenge on Ben Ali, who fled the country in shame. They are internally focused on the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

affairs within their country. Al Qaeda fails to recognize this opportunity and admonishes them to take up arms and receive military training for the purpose of joining its cause against the West.

### C. SECOND MESSAGE TO TUNISIA

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb released its second statement to the people of Tunisia on January 26, 2011. This statement contains an introduction, offering congratulations to the people, followed by six key “notes.” The first note admonishes the people not to assume the battle is won. More conflict is at hand. Second, the United States and France will not accept a change in Tunisia that does not interest them. Third, Ben Ali nearly let Tunisia fall under Christian rule. Fourth, Saudi Arabia, or the “Peninsula of the Messenger,” is guilty of harboring the deposed Ben Ali. Fifth, Al Qaeda reminds the people that security forces remaining in place after an ousted dictator are dangerous, and guilty of committing massacres and other crimes. Sixth, Al Qaeda states that the future of Tunisia is not certain, and that even decades of political work do not result in freedom from oppressive regimes. The statement concludes with an invitation to join Al Qaeda in violent jihad.

The introduction of this message indicates the parasitic nature of Al Qaeda as an organization, as it endeavors to seize the spirit of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. According to Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, head of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications at the U.S. State Department, Al Qaeda is eager to exploit and commandeer the explanation of events for its own purposes.<sup>51</sup> The introduction of the second message indicates this. It praises Tunisians, invoking Allah to “reward goodness to the sons of Qafsah, Nabul and Douz, and every city from Tunisia’s cities and every village from its villages.”<sup>52</sup> It notes that the revolution was not a normal one, but one that had a tremendous ripple effect within the “Arabic Capitals.” Evidence of Al Qaeda’s attempt to claim credit is found in the following expression:

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<sup>51</sup> Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, “Discussion on al Qaeda” (presentation at the U.S. State Department, Washington, D.C., September 19, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> “To Our People in Tunisia,” Flashpoint-intel.com, last modified January 26, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_aqimlibya1011.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_aqimlibya1011.pdf)

That day was a true celebration. From the most beautiful and joyous celebrations for Muslims, so congratulations to you, and to us, and to the rest of the Muslims with this celebration, and with this victory that time has for long not seen, so praise to Allah, then praise to Allah.<sup>53</sup>

This is a not-so-subtle attempt to inject itself into the success in Tunisia. Claiming credit or praise for the success of others is not new to Al Qaeda, and the events of the Arab Spring are susceptible to this kind of manipulation.

The first note within this message states, “Tunisia shouldn’t assume that they have already won the battle with Kufr and tyranny, as the battle remains lengthy and it is still in the beginning.”<sup>54</sup> Al Qaeda reminds the people that even though they have ejected Ben Ali from the country, the system that existed under his regime still remains. Not surprisingly, it makes yet another appeal for a replacement of this system:

So if the man-made religion doesn’t step off and become replaced by the transcendent religion, and if the [Islamic] Doctrine and the switched-off Sharia don’t return, and of the spoiled pride and invaded rights don’t return, then the duty upon Muslims in Tunisia is to be ready and not lay down their weapons.<sup>55</sup>

This appeal is likely to fail because the Tunisians never picked up weapons to overthrow the existing regime to begin with. It is also worthy to note at this point the secular nature of the Arab Spring. As indicated by citizens throughout Tunisia, the movement had much less to do with Islam than with human rights and democracy.

The second note in this message attempts to divert Tunisian ire toward the United States, the West, and most uniquely toward France, calling it, “the mother of wickedness.”<sup>56</sup> According to Al Qaeda, France supported Ben Ali “until the last moment, and it supported him to the highest limits until it offered him its expertise in the field of suppression.”<sup>57</sup> Additionally, it accuses France of supporting “the tyrannical rule of the criminal generals in Algeria” and backing them up in “slaughtering the Muslims

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

and suppressing them until this very day.”<sup>58</sup> It concludes this note by informing Tunisians that both America and France will intervene in the same way in their country if they are not deterred from doing so.

The third note contains a reference to a televised address given by Ben Ali on December 27, 2010. In this speech, Ben Ali addresses the people of Tunisia in the wake of the uprisings, attempting to assuage their grievances. In one passage of the speech, he identifies those he believes are the primary perpetrators of the demonstrations, calling them a “minority of agitators in the pay of others, and against the country’s interests.”<sup>59</sup> He expresses what he fears is the result of these demonstrations. He states:

This is a negative and anti-civil behavior that presents a distorted image of our country and impedes the flow of investors and tourists, which impacts negatively on job creation, while we need them to curb joblessness. Law will be enforced rigorously against these people.<sup>60</sup>

Linking the flow of investors and tourists to joblessness seems an inappropriate response to an infuriated populace, and it fuels more disdain. Protests continued unabated until Ben Ali stepped down almost two weeks later.

Ben Ali’s statement on tourism was not lost on Al Qaeda. It attempts to use his words to exacerbate a volatile situation. In Note Three, Al Qaeda states:

Ibn Ali ruled Tunisia and filled it with injustice, and he had its people wear the dress of hunger and fear, and he opened the doors to convert from Islam and closed the door on converting to it, until the Muslims almost became under the rule of Christians, who occupied the country under the cover of tourism.<sup>61</sup>

This again demonstrates Al Qaeda’s practice of borrowing words from its opponents in an attempt to claim the spirit of the Arab Spring for itself. The passage essentially states that because of the tourism, Muslims became subjected to the rule of Christians. The

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “Tunisia: speech by President Ben Ali,” CalChamber, last modified December 27, 2010, [http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/tunisia/ben\\_ali\\_speech\\_27122010.htm](http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/tunisia/ben_ali_speech_27122010.htm)

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “To Our People in Tunisia,” Flashpoint-intel.com, last modified January 26, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_aqimlibya1011.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_aqimlibya1011.pdf)

argument seems to be taken directly from Ben Ali's speech of December 27. The events in Tunisia and the Middle East as a whole caught it off guard and unprepared to effectively persuade a populace that is searching for leadership. Al Qaeda seems to have few options but to seize upon the weak argument of a defeated opponent, offering nothing of value to the people that it requires for support.

In its fourth note, Al Qaeda expresses further disdain for Ben Ali as an enemy to the people of Islam and criticizes the king of Saudi Arabia for giving him refuge there. First, Ben Ali is accused of outright hostility to the “pillars, rituals, sanctities, dress and appearance” of Islamists, forbidding them from their “obligation of Hajj and rituals of Umrah, using delusional excuses.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, Al Qaeda dedicates a large portion of the message to linking Ben Ali’s wickedness and opposition to Islam to Saudi Arabia and its king:

So when his matter became scandalized and when his injustice and crimes were revealed, and when the infidels disowned him, disappointed him and handed him over, and when that absolute loyalty he gave them didn’t help him, neither all these years he spent in their servitude, he who claims to being the servant of the Two Holy Haramain [King Abdulaziz] havened him in the Peninsula of the messenger, prayer and peace upon him.<sup>63</sup>

This passage may be difficult to decipher to Western eyes, but in essence it states the following: When Ben Ali’s crimes and injustices were revealed and his allies of the United States and the West disowned him, they did not support him. They turned on him, even though he was loyal to them for years. And after all this, he sought refuge in Saudi Arabia, under the protection of King Abdulaziz, who is supposed to be a protector of Mecca and Medina in the land of Muhammad.

It is no surprise that Al Qaeda also includes Saudi Arabia in its message to the people of Tunisia. Al Qaeda declared Saudi Arabia an enemy well before the attacks on September 11. It is a grudge that has its roots in the first Gulf War. Shortly after Osama bin-Laden returned to Saudi Arabia in 1989 from fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq was a tremendous concern to Saudi Arabia. Iraq had just finished active conflict with Iran, and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

began making demands on its neighbors as a new power in the Middle East. After Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990, Bin-Laden offered to liberate it with an army of a hundred thousand men, and the minister of defense, Prince Sultan, turned his offer down.<sup>64</sup> Saudi Arabia invited the U.S. and its armed forces to protect it instead.

This refusal was one of the key events in his process of radicalization. It was this event that solidified his belief that the United States had a corrupting influence on Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. By the time Bin-Laden left Saudi Arabia, he had declared it and the U.S. the top enemies of the Jihadist movement.<sup>65</sup> Regarding the current king of Saudi Arabia, Al Qaeda voices this animosity in its fourth note:

He lied, by the Lord of Kaaba, he isn't its servant but he is a deceiver of Allah and his messenger, and he doesn't know how to protect the haramain, and if he had in his heart an atom of protectiveness over the religion of Allah and over the Honorable Harmain, he would have declined on hosting in that pure land a criminal refused to be hosted by all the countries of Kufr.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, it is no surprise that Al Qaeda would seek every opportunity to accuse Saudi Arabia of betraying Islam. It is highly unlikely that this appeal to its long held hatred of Saudi Arabia gained any sympathy among the Tunisians looking for greater economic opportunity. The fourth note of the message closes with this prediction against King Abdulaziz: “Disaster will befall he who havens a manipulator, and disaster will hit he who discouraged the oppressed and havens the oppressor.”<sup>67</sup> Time will tell if this prediction comes to pass, or if Al Qaeda will have a hand in this predicted disaster.

The fifth note reiterates sentiment from its previous message, which is that the remaining security forces maintaining peace in Tunisia are a threat to the population. Al Qaeda reminds the people that the duty of the army and police “is to protect the ruler from the public. And for that they don’t hesitate in committing the ugliest of crimes and

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<sup>64</sup> *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words*, .ed Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2008), 21.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>66</sup> “To Our People in Tunisia,” Flashpoint-intel.com, last modified January 26, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_aqimlibya1011.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_aqimlibya1011.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

committing the ugliest of massacres to suppress any revolution or popular uprising.”<sup>68</sup> This is a reiteration of something Tunisians already know.

Last, the fifth note links the security forces to France by stating, “their crimes have exceeded the crimes of the secret French organizations.”<sup>69</sup> The purpose in mentioning France is to metaphorically rank the enemies of the people according to Al Qaeda. In this case, it suggests to them that if France is a serious threat to the freedom of Tunisia by acting as a puppet master to Ben Ali, the remaining security forces are a much greater concern. This is a subtle hint that even though Ben Ali is removed, the people will still need to take more action, and it leads easily into the last note of its message.

Al Qaeda’s last note in its second message to the people of Tunisia reiterates the accurate belief that its future is not certain. First, it states, “that Ibn Ali’s escape doesn’t necessarily mean that he who’ll succeed him will be better than him.” Building to its ultimate argument for a violent uprising against the remaining security forces, Al Qaeda tells the people that its experience with Ben Ali demonstrates “that these regimes do not get extirpated with political work, and even if it lasted for a number of decades.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, Al Qaeda is suggesting the people abandon the ineffective political process. Apostate regimes are not removed in this manner, even after great periods of time.

The final statement Al Qaeda makes to the people of Tunisia, mirrors the final invitation of its first message on January 13, 2011: the call to violent jihad. It tells them they “have won a battle but you haven’t won the war yet.”<sup>71</sup> The invitation is extended in this expression:

And we hope Allah-willing for you to have an upcoming important role in supporting Islam and its people, and supporting jihad and participating in fighting the people of Shirk and atheism.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

This statement needs little explanation. It does not deviate in any way from that which Al Qaeda has urged people throughout the Middle East and North Africa to do. It would have been surprising if it had closed its message with anything other than such a call to jihad. It remains unlikely that the people of Tunisia will accept this invitation and engage in overt acts of violence or even widespread support or sympathy for Al Qaeda or its cause.

#### **D. RECENT RHETORIC**

It is important to note that Tunisia's population has a reputation for largely supporting secular principles. However, there is receptiveness to the Islamist message among some segments of society.<sup>73</sup> Sheikh Al-Ghannouchi, who has been in exile in the United Kingdom for the past 22 years, has returned. He supports reforms that include an element of Islam. But, he advocates the more moderate ideal of Turkey's Islamist AKP party. It is unlikely that An-Nahda, al-Ghannouchi's party, could win more than 20 percent of future votes.<sup>74</sup> This is a long way from the majority needed to install what Al Qaeda would want: Sharia law.

This development is unacceptable to the senior leadership of Al Qaeda. As of this writing, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri made a recent statement regarding the likelihood of a continued secular government in Tunisia. The statement, released on June 10, 2012, says in part:

The leaders of the Islamic Ennahda Party in Tunisia declared that they would not demand the Islamic Sharia to be the source of legislation in order to reach a reconcilable constitution. Have you seen a hospital that has no relation to treating patients, or a pharmacy that declares it has no reason to sell medicine?<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> "Rebel Rousers – Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution," jane's.ihs.com, last modified February 18, 2011, <https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=+++1196151&Pubabbrev=JIR>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> "Support Your Sharia," flashpoint-intel.com, last modified, June 10, 2012, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hrc4ab-22oh-people-of-tunisia-support-your-sharc4abah22-en.pdf>

This analogy to medicine is intended to illustrate that, according to Zawahiri's logic, governance, constitutions, and the rule of law cannot be separated from Islam in the same way that hospitals and pharmacies cannot be separated from the needs of the sick. He further declares, "What is amazing is seeing the leadership of a group that relates itself to Islam and then says it does not advocate ruling by it." He believes "they oppose the clear text in the Qur'an," and that "they represent a symptom from the symptoms of our modern-day diseases."<sup>76</sup> It is no surprise also that Zawahiri would choose these medical metaphors, given his background as a medical doctor.

Zawahiri's message does not pass up the opportunity to condemn the United States and the West. According to him, "they are inventing an 'Islam' that pleases the American Department of State, the European Union and the Gulf [regime] scholars. An 'Islam' according to demand."<sup>77</sup> He informs the Muslim Ummah that Islam with this moderate, Western influence allows gambling, nude beaches, usurious banks, secular laws, and submission to international legitimacy.

Zawahiri attempts to co-opt the words of two prominent Tunisian sheiks, and uses their words to add credence to his own. These authorities are "Shaykh Muhammad Al-Khader Hussein, and Shaykh of Al-Azhar," who he claims are of Tunisian origin.<sup>78</sup> In this case, it is assumed he is referring to a prominent cleric that is connected with Al-Azhar University in Cairo. According to Zawahiri, they are the authors of the books "Critique to the Book, Islam and Origins of Ruling," and "Scientific Critique to the Book, Islam and Origins of Ruling," respectively.<sup>79</sup> These authors condemned the practice of "marginalizing politics from religion," as the Western states have done. Zawahiri says that their authoritative opinions prove that:

He who advocates dividing religion from politics is as if he envisioned another religion and called it Islam. Separating the state from religion is

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

the depreciation of most of the faith, and Muslims would not approach that except after they become ‘non-Muslims.<sup>80</sup>

It is unclear how well known these authors and their books and ideas are to the average Tunisian, and he goes through some effort to establish their credibility. Still, it appears that Zawahiri has attempted to use the opinions of others as a basis to influence Tunisians to reject anything other than the caliphate.

Finally, as in all messages to the people of Tunisia, Al Qaeda invites them to take some kind of action. Zawahiri says to them:

O’ honorable, free and protective ones in Tunisia, the masks have fell and the faces have been unveiled, so rise up to support your Sharia. Incite your people on a popular uprising to support the Sharia and affirm Islam and rule with the Qur’an. Tell the Muslim people in Tunisia that your Sharia is being buried alive just as it was buried in Turkey.

This passage recommends that the people rise up again in the same way they did when they ousted Ben Ali 18 months before. He condemns the Turkish model of government that the An-Nahda party advocates. This will likely have no effect, as the people of Tunisia wait for a government that offers greater economic opportunity and gives them greater self-determination.

#### E. POLLING DATA

Polling data validate the words of young Tunisians desperate for a better socioeconomic condition in Tunisia. As in Egypt, a July 10, 2012, Pew Poll found that 63% of Tunisians believe that democracy is a preferable form of government. To highlight their desperation, 59% of Tunisians polled stated that they felt a strong economy was more important than a good democracy. Only 40% felt that a good democracy was more important than a strong economy.<sup>81</sup> By way of comparison, only people from two of the six countries in the study felt that a good democracy was of

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> “Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life,” Pew Research Center, last modified July 10, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/07/10/most-muslims-want-democracy-personal-freedoms-and-islam-in-political-life/>.

greater importance than a strong economy. This study confirms what the people in Tunisia find most important in the Arab Spring: economic opportunity.

With regard to Al Qaeda itself, Tunisians do not support it. The same poll found that “extremist groups are largely rejected in predominantly Muslim nations, although significant numbers do express support for radical groups in several countries.” In Tunisia, people view Hamas as 50% favorable, Hezbollah as 46% favorable, the Taliban as 12% favorable, and Al Qaeda as 16% favorable.<sup>82</sup> These numbers do not bode well for an organization such as Al Qaeda that depends upon popular support to further its agenda. What it has done and what it says are not working in its favor.

#### **F. TUNISIA’S CHOICE**

These messages from Al Qaeda to the people of Tunisia demonstrate its inability to connect with them. The uprisings in this North African country have caught it off guard, unwilling, and unable to adapt its message to get the support it sorely needs. The people have accomplished in a few weeks, through relatively peaceful means, what Al Qaeda was unable to do through a decade of violence. The “apostate regimes” of the Arab World, starting with Tunisia’s, are toppling. It would seem that Al Qaeda could offer not only praise for the successful ousting of a tyrannical dictator, but a suggested path to the Sharia law it seeks.

There is certainly evidence and polling that suggest Muslims are not opposed to living with varying degrees of Islamic law within their governments. If Al Qaeda could offer a road map on how to proceed from a condition of regime change to a government that looked like something acceptable to the people of Tunisia, it might gain the support it has lost over the past several years. It cannot, however, accept even a moderate form of Islamic rule, such as that found in Turkey. Instead, it continually calls upon the people to join it in violent uprisings. Tunisians might ask at this point: To whom would this renewed fight be directed? After all, Ben Ali fled the country, safely protected in the borders of Saudi Arabia. There is no dictator toward whom a violent uprising might be directed. Al Qaeda points to the security forces that remain in Tunisia as the greatest

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

threat to its peace, though it never suggests a way to defeat these remaining forces. In fact, it was the Army, under Gen. Rachid Ammar who refused orders from Ben Ali to fire on unarmed protesters and who protected citizens from militias who were loyal to him after he fled to Saudi Arabia.<sup>83</sup>

Engaging in a civil war with the Tunisian military would be the last likely thing the people would try, and Ayman al Zawahiri would likely not advocate for direct action of this sort anyway. This is due to the experience of failure within the jihadist movement to prevail against the hated local regimes from the 1970s to the 1990s.<sup>84</sup> Al Qaeda fails to seize upon some of the common goals it shares with the people it hopes to attract, and instead of offering to join them, urges them to join with it. It cannot seem to find a way to make itself relevant within the context that exists in Tunisia.

The most significant issues to acknowledge about the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia are its underlying causes: jobs, economic opportunity, and personal freedoms. Al Qaeda said less about any of these than it did about installing an Islamist government. It could have seized upon the reasons behind the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. The cause of Al Qaeda is clearly not the cause of the people of Tunisia. Although Al Qaeda does make some more moderate points, and does upon occasion address the legitimate concerns of Tunisians, it undermines its own messaging by concluding that the Tunisians need to do more. It urges them in a haphazard way to take up arms, send them their sons for training, and divert the people to their unique brand of struggle against Israel and the United States.

There are indications that a division between Al Qaeda senior leadership continues in the wake of the Arab Spring. Wadoud in the first message to Tunisia on January 14, 2011, extends an appeal for violent Jihad, while Zawahiri in his message of June 10, 2012, encourages popular uprisings in the spirit of the original, non-violent movement that ousted Ben Ali. This is inconsistent messaging from event to event, and

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<sup>83</sup> “Rebel Rousers – Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution,” [jane's.ihs.com](http://jane's.ihs.com), last modified February 18, 2011, <https://janes.ihs.com.libproxy.nps.edu/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=+++1196151&Pubabbrev=JIR>

<sup>84</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 25.

across its organization. It could indicate a division between Al Qaeda leaders hiding in the Afghan/Pakistan border and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. It indicates that some of the splinter organizations are distancing themselves from the Al Qaeda brand name. At the very least, Al Qaeda is having difficulty communicating a consistent narrative, and therefore, an inconsistent direction as an organization.

The future of Tunisia is uncertain, though for the moment, it remains in a stable political environment as it sorts out its future with free and fair elections. While Tunisians wish to focus on building on the gains made, AQ urges them to violence against distant sources of potential aid. As for Al Qaeda, because it fails to create an appealing narrative that accurately captures the true concerns of Muslims in Tunisia, its future as a terrorist organization in decline is more certain.

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### III. EGYPT'S UPRISING

The events surrounding the Arab Spring of 2011 have had significant impact on the Middle East, including both state and non-state actors, and the United States' role in the region. As populations of Muslims and other citizens of the region rise up in protest against oppressive regimes, what will the outcomes be? Egypt is a key country in these events, given its centrality and that it is mentioned in the Quran. It is the homeland of senior Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the well-known Islamic group, the Muslim Brotherhood. In Egypt in early February 2011, the Hosni Mubarak regime fell as a result of popular uprisings. The former dictator's military currently holds the reins of power, supposedly to be handed over at the conclusion of successful free and fair elections. Many key players, not the least of which include the citizens of Egypt, have a great interest in the conclusion of these events. The United States continually encourages Egypt and other nations of the Arab world to adopt liberal democracies. What form of government would other actors, such as Al Qaeda or the Muslim Brotherhood, prefer to see emerge once the dust settles? Al Qaeda has traditionally fought for a Muslim caliphate that imposes Sharia law. Now that Egypt's future is in such a precarious state, how does it view the Arab Spring, and will it change the nature and tone of its rhetoric?

These events caught Al Qaeda by surprise; it faces a strategic crossroads and has attempted to alter its communications to appeal to a more moderate audience.<sup>85</sup> This chapter will address the words and actions of Al Qaeda regarding the Arab Spring, specifically in the country of Egypt. It also will make some comparisons of its messages to the words of the Muslim Brotherhood, a leading, legitimate organization in Egypt. Although popular uprisings occurred in countries throughout the Middle East, starting with Tunisia, Egypt is considered, at least by Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and other actors, to be the foremost nation in the region.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, the author will present a short background of Al Qaeda's failings in the past few years that inform its

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<sup>85</sup> Fawaz Gerges, "Context of the Drivers of the Awakenings" (presentation, Arab Spring Symposium, Carlisle Barracks, Penn., January 30–31, 2012).

<sup>86</sup> "Exclusive: Transcript of Qaradawi's Speech in Cairo," Translating Jihad, last modified March 7, 2011, <http://www.translatingjihad.com/2011/03/exclusive-transcript-of-qaradawis.html>.

strategy regarding the Arab Spring. In order to thrive, its rhetoric must resonate with some element within the Muslim Ummah in Egypt.

#### A. AL QAEDA: WHAT IT SAYS

Al Qaeda, through the rhetoric of its spokesman, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri made a number of statements that shed light on its perspective of the events surrounding the Arab Spring in Egypt. It released a message in April of 2011, during the height of the uprisings, through its As-Sahab Media Foundation entitled “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode Five.” This message was divided into a number of sections, addressing various countries and target audiences throughout the Muslim world. In section two of this monograph, he addresses the events in the “revolting” Egypt. Aside from the usual criticisms of the United States and its allies, Zawahiri makes several statements that demonstrate AQ’s evolving methods and attempts to persuade people in new ways. First, it views the toppling of the Mubarak regime as an opportunity to be exploited or lost. Second, he states that democracy is just as evil and contrary to Sharia law as the Mubarak regime, and that the U.S. cares not what type of regime is installed, as long as its interests are served. And third, Sharia law is the superior and only pious option for those who consider themselves true Muslims.

Before an analysis of Zawahiri’s words, it is worth highlighting that themes within his narrative seem to have been adopted from themes found in speeches from other Islamic leaders. The most striking example of this is from a speech given by Yusuf Qaradawi on February 18, 2011. Qaradawi is one of the most highly acclaimed and well-known Muslim clerics, and a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Speaking to the youth in Cairo on February 18, 2011, after a 30-year ban from Egypt, he said:

Beware that no one steals this revolution from you. I warn against the hypocrites, who are ready to put on a new face, and speak with a new tongue each day. Yesterday they were against the revolution, and now they’re with the revolution. I warn against these. I say to the youth: guard your revolution.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

It is very likely that Zawahiri adopted this theme of stealing the youth's revolution from Qaradawi's address. Zawahiri was at one time a staunch member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Qaradawi is an influential, radical member of the Muslim Brotherhood today. He had been living in exile in Qatar until the collapse of the Mubarak regime. Qaradawi's popularity and influence would not have gone unnoticed by Zawahiri.

Zawahiri begins the section of Al Qaeda's "message of hope" by asking the question that most people in the world want to know. Now that the government of Mubarak is toppled, and a military governing council presides over Egypt, what will happen? It is obvious that this council could hold on to the power if it so chooses. Free and fair elections are only just now beginning, and their legitimacy has yet to be seen. Zawahiri states:

The Egyptian people's revolution succeeded in removing the tyrant, and then what? And this is the dangerous question and the big challenge. Our people and brothers in Egypt: many populaces revolted throughout history, but also many of the revolutions ended with undesirable results for these populaces, and sometimes opposite of what they want. Revolutions many times get stolen, and they transform into suppressive and abusive regimes<sup>88</sup>.

It seems that Zawahiri took the theme of stealing the revolution from Qardawi's speech, which occurred two months before Zawahiri issued his "message of hope" to the people of Egypt.

To exemplify what he means by a revolution being stolen from the people, Zawahiri gives a number of historical examples where, in his view, this happened. He sites the French Revolution, and the chain of events leading to the rise of the Soviet Union, after which governments emerged that did not meet the expectation of the people. Of note is his reference to the Egyptian revolution of 1952, no doubt to make the message more personal to his audience. This revolution would have been supported by the people at the time, and viewed favorably as an opportunity to part with British imperialism.

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<sup>88</sup> 'Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5,' Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/intel-document/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/intel-document/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

Instead of an acceptable Islamic caliphate under Sharia law, the results of this revolution were 60 years of oppression under apostate regimes.

In order to solidify the argument that revolutions are often stolen from the people, Zawahiri places Egypt in the context of a key and important country in the Middle East that cannot be viewed through a narrow lens:

Also, we should not look at the conditions in Egypt through a narrow outlook, but we should look at it from a wide outlook that comprehends the regional and international reality; as Egypt, with its critical location, cannot be alienated from what goes on around it in the world. We cannot understand the current events in Egypt away from the stance of the West and America toward the Islamic World.<sup>89</sup>

In other words, in spite of the uprisings of the Egyptian people, and their right to their own government, Zawahiri insinuates that other actors could perhaps have designs on Egypt for their own nefarious purposes. This supporting point is a subtle lead into the claim that the United States will seek to exploit the situation.

Qaradawi, as a top Muslim cleric, addressed hundreds of thousands of people in Tahrir Square with another theme: Egyptian exceptionalism. This would no doubt serve to instill a sense of pride in the large body of young Muslims gathered there. He said:

The Qur'an only mentions two countries by name: [Babylon], and Egypt, which is mentioned five times in the noble Qur'an. No country is mentioned multiple times in the Qur'an except this country... Egypt was the qibla of Islamic culture, and also of Islamic learning and the Arabic language throughout history.<sup>90</sup>

Al Qaeda, through Zawahiri, seems to have stolen this theme from Qaradawi's speech as well. He says:

Those who try to cover the truth about Egypt's Islamic orientation and its exceptional role amongst Muslims, and its leadership of the Islamic world for centuries; those didn't only give up the pillars of Aqeeda and roots of

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> "Exclusive: Transcript of Qaradawi's Speech in Cairo," Translating Jihad, last modified March 7, 2011, <http://www.translatingjihad.com/2011/03/exclusive-transcript-of-qaradawis.html>.

Islamic ruling, but also they are exceedingly and blindingly avoiding historic and geographic facts and rules of consensus.<sup>91</sup>

That Al Qaeda adopted this similar theme many weeks after Qaradawi's speech is further indication that the revolution caught it off guard and unprepared to exploit the Arab Spring. It appears as though Al Qaeda is attempting to assimilate the same popular sentiment and notion of Egypt's greatness in contemporary and historical context that the Muslim Brotherhood expresses. At the very least, Zawahiri seems to be attempting to co-opt the same Islamic authority and popularity enjoyed by Qaradawi.

Zawahiri's "message of hope" also denigrates democracy. This is an important component of his discourse, as the Arab Spring was a popular uprising based on the concepts of free speech, human rights, and equality. Al Qaeda wants to undermine this idea, and seeks to "educate" Egyptians on this point:

This is the truth about democracy; it allows everything regardless of it being degrading or contradictory, as long as the majority agrees with it. Democracy in reality is the games [sic] of the number of votes without any moral, valuable or religious reference.<sup>92</sup>

If Al Qaeda can convince the average Muslim, who walked the streets of Tahr Square for freedom and democracy, that democracy is not in accordance with true Islamic principles, then he may also be persuaded to join further calls to action from Al Qaeda.

There is reason to believe that many Egyptian Muslims would respond to the idea that democracy is contrary to Islamic principles. As a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Zawahiri is well acquainted with Islamist ideals in Egypt, and he makes reference to a number of Islamists who were killed by the former apostate regimes. One of those was Sayyid Qutb, who had this to say about democracy:

Who will dare to claim that those million of hungry, naked barefoot peasants whose intestines are devoured by worms, whose eyes are bitten by flies and whose blood is sucked by insects are humans who enjoy human dignity and human rights [as the Capitalist slogans claim?].... Who

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<sup>91</sup> "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5," Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

will dare to claim that the hundreds of thousands of disabled beggars, who search for crumbs in garbage boxes, who are naked, barefoot, with faces crusted with dirt.... Who will dare to say that they are the source of authority in the nation, based on democratic elections?<sup>93</sup>

Zawahiri draws upon the name and credibility of Qutb, who is considered one of the originators of contemporary Islamist ideology. He assumes the authority and influence of a popular Islamic martyr to convince Egyptians that the democracy they seek is not, nor will it be, what they envision.

Zawahiri denigrates the United States throughout his message to the Egyptian people. He depicts the United States as the puppet master of the unseated Mubarak regime and its predecessors, and now as a menacing force waiting in the wings. In spite of public statements by the United States in support of the transition to liberal democracy in Egypt, Zawahiri again admonishes Egyptians:

America does not care who rules Egypt after Mubarak; whether a military or civil government, or democratic or suppressive, but it cares that the governance transfers peacefully, in a calculated way, to a government that walks the same footsteps of Mubarak in fighting the Islamic forces, protection of Israel's security, sanctions on Gaza and service to the American interests. And America's interests are entangled with Mubarak's interests as well as the military institution.<sup>94</sup>

This rhetoric alludes to more meddling in Egyptian affairs by the United States, although he admits that there must be some truth to its words. He says, "America wants a regime that gives people some freedoms, and I highlight the word 'some,' but does not threaten its interests and does not touch the security of Israel."<sup>95</sup>

Finally, all of this reasoning and logic reveals what Al Qaeda wants: an Islamic caliphate ruling over Egypt. This comes as no surprise, as it has professed this goal from its inception. Now that the Mubarak regime is gone, Zawahiri issues the clarion call:

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<sup>93</sup> John L. Esposito, *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 72.

<sup>94</sup> "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5," Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

And so, I call upon every Muslim and every free and honorable one in Egypt to call for and seek a holistic reform of the situation as we are in front of a regime that is collapsing, so we have to build a righteous regime instead, and this is a rare, historic opportunity and it should not escape us.<sup>96</sup>

To be specific, he declares, “Egypt must call for a popular campaign to demand that the Sharia be the source of legislation, and for the Sharia to be ruling not ruled.”<sup>97</sup> In short, Al Qaeda reasons that the time is right; the apostate regime is overthrown, and now is the time to move forward with reform and transformation to Sharia law. What is still missing from Al Qaeda’s plan, however, is a clear pathway from Sharia law to creating a caliphate.

#### **B. A KINDER, GENTLER AL-QAEDA?**

Within Zawahiri’s message are two noteworthy, confusing statements, considering the violent and intolerant legacy of Al Qaeda. The first statement is a warning from Zawahiri to “those who are trying to establish a regime in Egypt that is estranged from its religion, that they are creating an extended Fitna that won’t calm, and they should only blame themselves.”<sup>98</sup> Fitna refers to upheaval and turmoil that may test the faith of Muslims. He claims that his enemies will turn these words against him, to sound as though he is threatening attacks – which he professes he is not. This statement, he asserts, pertains to a “wide, extended error, historically, politically and socially that is very far and highly enraging, should the dwarfs attempt to manipulate the truth of Egypt’s Islamic Orientation.”<sup>99</sup> The meaning behind this statement is unclear, but it seems that Zawahiri is simply implying that any effort to establish a government in Egypt that does not include Sharia, or ultimately a caliphate, will be met with more turmoil and upheaval.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

Within this part of his message, Zawahiri appears to have again a theme from Yusuf Qaradawi's speech. It is instructive to look at the content of his speech first, in order to highlight the same themes in Zawahiri's "message of hope," which he issues two months later. Qaradawi states:

In Tahir Square, our Coptic brothers were standing, guarding their brethren while they prayed. I invite them today, not to guard their brethren, but to worship with their Muslim brothers, giving thanks to Almighty Allah. Muslims and Christians (should) worship together.<sup>100</sup>

It seems that Qaradawi adopts a conciliatory tone in his words to the Muslims in Tahir Square. Does this idea of acceptance of, and brotherhood with, Coptic Christians meet with approval from Al Qaeda?

The spirit of brotherhood felt among Egyptians at this time was too hard for Al Qaeda to ignore. The next statement, which seems out of character for any spokesman for Al Qaeda, addresses coexistence with the "nation's partners of Christians and non-Muslims."<sup>101</sup> It is not well known for its tolerance of anything other than a strict, subjective interpretation of the Quran's teachings regarding outsiders. He refers to Christians and non-Muslims as "partners." Zawahiri also expresses concern that opportunists will make the claim that a Sharia government in Egypt will threaten peaceful relationships with non-Muslims. This will be especially problematic when, according to him, this new caliphate rises to preeminence in the Islamic and Arab world in defending its Ummah against enemy oppression. He says that this idea is contrary to peaceful relationships with non-Muslims. He states:

This is an unacceptable, intentional and subjective mixing; we have lived with non-Muslims in the Islamic homelands, and we remain living and will live Allah-willing [with non-Muslims], and any problem that faces them... be solved if the relation is based on peace and loyalty through wisdom, piety and accountability."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> "Exclusive: Transcript of Qaradawi's Speech in Cairo," Translating Jihad, last modified March 7, 2011, <http://www.translatingjihad.com/2011/03/exclusive-transcript-of-qaradawis.html>.

<sup>101</sup> "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5," Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Even though Zawahiri has disavowed the Muslim Brotherhood as too tolerant an organization, he seizes an opportunity to ride the popularity of Qaradawi. Al Qaeda is not known for its tolerance. Zawahiri steals the theme of tolerance and reconciliation from Yusuf Qaradawi's speech. This is an obvious inconsistency with Al Qaeda's well-known penchant for violence and hateful rhetoric toward governments and peoples throughout the Middle East and the world.

These statements seem confusing and contradictory on the surface. Is the Al Qaeda terror network advocating a peaceful coexistence with those not of their faith under Sharia law? Is it also concerned that target audiences might believe it is advocating violence in their contention that a regime estranged from its religion would create an extended *fitna*? Surely this is not the case. However, as it has done throughout its history, AQ takes verses and teachings from the Quran and interprets them as it sees fit. Or, it simply applies teachings where and when its purposes are best served. As in Tunisia, Al Qaeda demonstrates that it is a “parasitic” organization that co-opts the popularity and persuasiveness of other figures and uses them to its benefit.<sup>103</sup> In this case, Zawahiri makes the argument that the Sharia-based government he advocates is benevolent and tolerant of its Christian and non-Muslim “partners.” Perhaps he is referring to the Islamic concept of *jizya*, which allows non-Muslims, typically Christians and Jews living within traditional Muslim lands, to pay a tax in exchange for relative autonomy and exemption from military service. As an added bonus, it appears that his description of an Egypt under Sharia law will gain “back its pioneering leadership of the Islamic and Arab World.”<sup>104</sup> This line of reasoning subtly suggests a need for more action on the part of Egyptians.

The conciliatory tones of these arguments are especially noteworthy within the context of the other points within his message. They are formulated to appeal to more moderate Islamists. Moderate Islamists would not be inclined to the sort of violence Al

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<sup>103</sup> Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, “Discussion on al Qaeda” (presentation at the U.S. State Department, Washington, D.C., September 19, 2012).

<sup>104</sup> “Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5,” Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

Qaeda favors in removing regimes it views as apostate. They want to live a life of piety under Sharia law, and perhaps are sympathetic to some or all of AQ's causes, however, moderate Islamists will flatly reject a radicalized argument of violence and the extremist ideal of Sharia Al Qaeda endorses. As a result, the rhetoric must sound softer, appeasing, and appealing to moderate ears. Zawahiri uses these arguments as pretext for the adoption of Sharia law and an Islamic caliphate.

Zawahiri's "Message of Hope" contains subtle and logical reasoning. He begins by praising the struggles of the people of Egypt, but he reminds them that they are in a precarious situation until the question of governance is settled. This line of thought proceeds methodically to the fact that Egypt is a key player in the Middle East and the world, and what happens there matters to other nations—particularly to the United States. As always, the United States is depicted as the single source of danger, plotting to install another puppet regime under the guise of democracy. Finally, Zawahiri reaches the predictable conclusion that Egypt must unite under Sharia law. All of this is a subtle call to more action, stating that the Mujahidin stands by and with the people of Egypt in this struggle against tyranny.

### C. AL QAEDA: ITS NARRATIVE STRATEGY

Al Qaeda as an international Jihadist movement has faced a number of significant challenges to its cause, and many experts believe it is in an era of decline. One key reason for this decline in support is because of the extreme sectarian violence perpetrated by Al Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The people of Iraq rejected the brutal tactics of suicide bombs and the targeting of other Muslims because Islam specifically forbids these tactics. Yet, Al Qaeda must operate under the guise that it is a guardian of Islam and operates according to classical Islamic texts. This paradox presents a challenge to Al Qaeda, especially when it attempts to appeal to citizens in Egypt who have largely avoided violence, at least during the Arab Spring, as a means to overthrow an oppressive regime.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, *Self Inflicted Wounds* (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point, 2010), 31.

During the height of the U.S. troop surge in Iraq, when violence was at its greatest point, Zawahiri made exceptions to the Islamic tenet of withholding violence against other Muslims. He claimed that during a defensive jihad – which he viewed was the case in Iraq at the time – it was permissible to kill those who did not meet the strict requirements of *takfir*, or apostasy. The average jihadist on the street had no way to determine whether an intended target was in fact an apostate against Islam.<sup>106</sup> Since the exigencies of combat did not allow for an authoritative and time-consuming opinion on the matter, a jihadist was given the leeway to err on the side of being wrong about a potential target’s loyalty to Islam. Even the killing of innocent women and children who were used as human shields was acceptable as long as the target was considered to be legitimate by the attacker.

When Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Iraq began to lose its grip on the people in the wake of the Sunni Awakening, Zawahiri himself recognized that perhaps a change in tactics was in order. The United States intercepted a letter between Zawahiri and Zarqawi in October of 2005 that revealed a conflict within the organization regarding extreme tactics and the use of the media. The two “agreed on the strategy to be pursued,” but “Zawahiri considered Zarqawi’s tactics to be risky and dangerous.”<sup>107</sup> In the letter, Zawahiri seeks to “convince Zarqawi to adopt a more measured attitude,” and to “restrain his enthusiasm for beheading foreign hostages and showing footage of the executions on the Internet.”<sup>108</sup> Zawahiri did not object to the acts, but he felt that they were detrimental to the greater cause, and “urged Zarqawi to avoid any action that ‘the masses do not understand or approve.’ ”<sup>109</sup>

This letter between the two Al Qaeda leaders, which was intercepted more than six years ago, demonstrates a sense of self-awareness even then. It recognizes that Al Qaeda’s historical advocacy of physical violence, especially with respect to other

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>107</sup> *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words*, .ed Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2008), 240.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>109</sup> Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, *Self Inflicted Wounds* (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point, 2010), 124.

Muslims, has a limited appeal. How does Al Qaeda view this sort of injudicious application of violence in light of the Arab Spring?

Al Qaeda leader Shaykh Atiyallah specifically addresses the issue of violence against Muslims. In March 2011, he released a statement through As-Sahab Media Foundation urging jihadists to exercise restraint and judgment in their operations. His first aim is to “assure [Al Qaeda’s] complete disavowal of any operation(s) that target Muslims, whether in their mosques, markets, roads and gatherings.”<sup>110</sup> Second, he issues direction and guidance to Al Qaeda affiliates. They should exercise caution and discretion in their operations:

I call upon them to release orders to brigades and units in combat in the field forbidding bombings and ... massacres at Muslim mosques and their surroundings, and public places such as markets, stadiums, and the like, regardless of what the goal may be; in order to control the matters, and for caution and to avoid mistakes and damage.<sup>111</sup>

Third, Atiyallah admonishes field commanders to “be highly strict in validating the conditions for that, wherein contraindication [sic] is absent, thus, the damage [to the enemies] would be considerably big with narrow chances of damaging anything else.” In other words, commanders are to exercise strict discretion and judgment, to avoid any kind of collateral damage. Finally, he addresses the issue of “sacrificial, intended-martyrs,” or suicide bombers. This individual “must not go forth before having total confidence that the target is legitimate and that executing is [only] to gain the grace of Allah.”<sup>112</sup> Suicide bombers, known to kill large numbers of innocent bystanders are to exercise judgment in minimizing the number of innocent victims.

This message to both the Arab world and Al Qaeda affiliates demonstrates recognition that as an organization, it must make changes in rhetoric and tactics in order to appeal to the youth who exercised restraint in challenging the Mubarak regime. Whereas Al Qaeda in times past liberally exercised violence in deed and word, it now

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<sup>110</sup> “Shaykh Atiyallah, Glorifying the Sanctity of the Muslims’ Blood,” Flash Point Partners, last modified March 14, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_atiyallah031411](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_atiyallah031411).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

seems to acknowledge, if only to itself, that this type of strategy will not garner much popular support in Egypt and elsewhere.

#### **D. AL QAEDA'S NARRATIVE IMPACT**

Polling data show that the desires of citizens not only in Egypt, but also throughout the Muslim world, oppose Al Qaeda and its themes. A Pew Poll released on July 10, 2012, states: "Solid Majorities in Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia and Jordan believe democracy is the best form of government, as do a plurality of Pakistanis."<sup>113</sup> They also support specific features of liberal democracies such as competitive elections and free speech. During the Arab Spring, 71% of Egyptians viewed democracy as preferable, and that number dropped only by 4% over the course of one year.<sup>114</sup> As previously noted, AQ denounces democracy and all that it encompasses, putting it at odds with the desires of the people.

If the people are in support of liberal democracy and its ideals, they are leery of Al Qaeda's leaders and its ideals. In Egypt, one year after the death of Osama bin-Laden, Egyptians gave Al Qaeda a 71% unfavorable rating, and 21% viewed it favorably. In 2011, shortly before bin-Laden's death, Muslims' confidence in him dropped considerably. Only 22% of Egyptians expressed confidence in bin-Laden, down from 27% five years earlier.<sup>115</sup> AQ and its leaders are losing the support they require from the people.

#### **E. AL QAEDA: AT A STRATEGIC CROSSROADS**

Al Qaeda is at a strategic crossroads. As such, it requires a change to its tactics and rhetoric in order to achieve support for its cause. It does not want to be left out of the Arab Spring. It wants to continue to be relevant, and seems to acknowledge that it is not

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<sup>113</sup> "Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life," Pew Research Center, last modified July 10, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/07/10/most-muslims-want-democracy-personal-freedoms-and-islam-in-political-life/>.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> "On Anniversary of bin Laden's Death, Little Backing of Al Qaeda," Pew Research Center, last modified April 30, 2012. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/04/30/on-anniversary-of-bin-ladens-death-little-backing-of-al-qaeda/>.

breathing well as an organization. It needs to communicate from a centralized location, but it has operated as a decentralized organization, with minimal or no control over affiliated networks, as in the case of Al Qaeda in Iraq. If the outcome of legitimate elections in Egypt and elsewhere leads to division, then Al Qaeda's rhetoric will resonate and could receive renewed energy.<sup>116</sup> To renew its cause, Al Qaeda must accomplish three things: exploit the political instability that exists in Egypt, prevent its legacy of fighting the Far Enemy from losing relevancy, and prepare to take advantage of discontent should the democratic process fail.

Al Qaeda is adept at exploiting vulnerable countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen for its global jihad. Egypt is no exception. Al Qaeda has made several statements that show its attempts to capitalize upon the instability in Egypt. Zawahiri's messages are full of praise and adulation for the people of Egypt who overthrew Mubarak and others:

Greetings to those free honorable ones who overthrew two of the most corrupt regimes that have ruled our countries; the regime of Zain al-Abideen bin Ali in Tunisia and the regime of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.<sup>117</sup>

Al Qaeda will continue to claim a part in this uprising in Egypt, although it has nothing to do with it. The overthrow of the Mubarak regime was a youth-driven, social media event, and it appears that the euphoria may be wearing off.<sup>118</sup> In any event, the military of the former regime still holds power, and Al Qaeda will monitor and harness this condition to further its own purposes.

As has been discussed previously, Al Qaeda continues to disparage the United States and its Western allies in the eyes of regional target audiences. It must do so because the distinction between the “far” and “near” enemy has become difficult for

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<sup>116</sup> Juan C. Zarate and David A. Gordon, “The Battle for Reform with Al-Qaeda,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2011, accessed November 29, 2011, [http://artisresearch.com/articles/Zarate\\_Battle\\_Reform\\_Al-Qaeda.pdf](http://artisresearch.com/articles/Zarate_Battle_Reform_Al-Qaeda.pdf).

<sup>117</sup> “Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5,” Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpoint-intel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

<sup>118</sup> Eric Schmitt, “Counter Strike” (presentation at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Calif., December 6, 2009).

Muslims to discern. This is due to Al Qaeda having killed far more fellow Muslims and others than it has Westerners.<sup>119</sup> Zawahiri has said that Al Qaeda will “continue attacking America and its partners and aggravate them, until they leave...Muslim homelands and stop supporting the titan tyrants in them.”<sup>120</sup> Al Qaeda must portray the overthrowing of the Mubarak regime – the near enemy – as part of a broader strategy against the far enemy, as Osama bin-Laden attempted to do in 2009. He said in a released video:

The rare and valuable opportunity for those honest in their desire to deliver al-Aqsa (Jerusalem) is in backing the Mujahidin in Iraq with everything they need in order to liberate Mesopotamia.<sup>121</sup>

Egyptian target audiences must be convinced that Al Qaeda has relevancy to their situation. This will be challenging because it has had no part in the overthrow of the former regime, and it is likely that a peaceful resolution will emerge.

Al Qaeda must lay the groundwork in preparation for what could potentially be its greatest opportunity in Egypt. If free and fair elections fail or are seen as illegitimate, or the Egyptian military refuses to turn over real power, the resulting disillusionment will make the environment more fertile for Al Qaeda’s ideology. This will make it easier to find recruits, funding, and logistical support to operate and grow.<sup>122</sup> Osama bin-Laden recognized this in his only statement about the Arab Spring. He warned Muslims against losing the “historic opportunity to raise the Ummah and be liberated from enslavement to the wishes of the rulers and the man-made laws for Western domination.”<sup>123</sup> Laying this groundwork and moving forward will be all the more difficult with the death of bin-Laden and other key leaders.

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<sup>119</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 295.

<sup>120</sup> Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, *Self-Inflicted Wounds* (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point, 2010), 62.

<sup>121</sup> Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, *Self-Inflicted Wounds* (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point, 2010), 62.

<sup>122</sup> Juan C. Zarate and David A. Gordon, “The Battle for Reform with Al-Qaeda,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2011, accessed November 29, 2011, [http://artisresearch.com/articles/Zarate\\_Battle\\_Reform\\_Al-Qaeda.pdf](http://artisresearch.com/articles/Zarate_Battle_Reform_Al-Qaeda.pdf).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 112.

## F. AL QAEDA AND ITS FUTURE

Al Qaeda as an organization is in decline. Beginning in 2003 with its failure to connect with the people in Iraq against the far enemy, it faces an uphill battle. There are three possible conclusions to be made about it: Its networked organization makes it difficult to eradicate entirely, it will continue to be weak and incoherent in its ideology, and it will continue to have difficulty making the distinction between the near and far enemy.<sup>124</sup> Its leaders have made statements that reveal its struggle to gain relevancy in the Egyptian Arab Spring. It adopts themes from other organizations that it has historically sought to differentiate from; it renounces concepts of democracy that the people of Egypt want. The evidence is clear that Al Qaeda is struggling to exist. In the words of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born cleric and deceased Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula leader:

We do not know yet what the outcome would be, and we do not have to. The outcome doesn't have to be an Islamic government for us to consider what is occurring to be a step in the right direction. Regardless of the outcome, whether it is an Islamic government or the likes of al-Baradi, Amr Mousa or another military figure; whatever the outcome is, our mujahidin brothers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the rest of the Muslim world will get a chance to breathe after three decades of suffocation.<sup>125</sup>

In response to whether Al Qaeda views the Arab Spring with glee or despair, Awlaki says, "Glee yes, but not despair."<sup>126</sup> Awlaki was killed on September 30, 2011, in a U.S. drone strike in Yemen. Even though Mohamed Mursi was the first democratically elected president in Egypt, its future is still uncertain. The United States, the world, and Al Qaeda must wait and see.

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<sup>124</sup> Glenn Robinson, "Class Lecture" (presentation at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Calif. December 8, 2009).

<sup>125</sup> "Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's 'Inspire' Magazine-Anwar al-Awlaki: 'The Tsunami of Change,'" last modified March 29, 2011, <http://info.publicintelligence.net/InspireMarch2011.pdf>

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

## **IV. LIBYA: A VIOLENT EPISODE IN THE ARAB SPRING**

Two days before ousted Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, Muammar Gaddafi expressed his disappointment at the protests there. On Libyan TV, Gaddafi told Tunisia “it now lives in fear. Families could be raided and slaughtered in their bedrooms and the citizens in the street killed as if it was the Bolshevik or the American Revolution.”<sup>127</sup> His words would foreshadow what was in store for Libya over the course of the next nine months. As his regime was threatened, Gaddafi swore in a live broadcast on state TV that he was not “going to leave this land. I will die as a martyr at the end ... I shall remain, defiant. Muammar is leader of the revolution until the end of time.”<sup>128</sup> He made good on his threat. Libyan forces viciously attacked unarmed protesters; hundreds were killed by the time the National Transition Council established itself in Tripoli on August 26, 2011. Removing him from power took a combined effort of the National Transition Council and an international coalition, which provided tactical air and ground support. Leaders the world over, including those of Al Qaeda, demanded he step down. An examination of rhetoric, however, reveals Al Qaeda’s unwillingness to generate a relevant narrative that will find favor with the people of Libya, who desire economic opportunity and a voice in the political process. In Libya it continues to emphasize its overused themes of aggression against the United States and the West, its renunciation of democratic ideals, and its insistence on the establishment of a Muslim caliphate.

### **A. SIGNIFICANCE OF LIBYA IN THE ARAB SPRING**

What makes the uprising in Libya unique? It is unlike the rebellions that occurred in other countries of the Middle East for a few key reasons. First, it lacks the sense of national identity that other Arab countries have. It has not existed under central authority

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<sup>127</sup> Matthew Weaver, “Muammar Gaddafi Condemns Tunisia Uprising,” *The Guardian*, last modified January 16, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/16/muammar-gaddafi-condemns-tunisia-uprising>.

<sup>128</sup> Ian Black, “Gaddafi Urges Violent Showdown and Tells Libya ‘I’ll Die a Martyr,’ “ *The Guardian*, February 22, 2011,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/22/muammar-gaddafi-urges-violent-showdown>

before Italian colonial rule in 1911, and is generally made up of two major tribes: Beni Salim, and Beni Hilal.<sup>129</sup> Gaddafi's long-term goal regarding Libya was:

To provide Libyans with a common purpose, a determined sense of national belonging and a strong feeling of citizenship. In Gadhafi's mind, 'the existence of a national identity is the basis for the survival of nations'. He developed a blueprint of what he thought Libya should look like and what the common characteristics of Libyans had to be.<sup>130</sup>

This attempt to unite the people of Libya under a national identity did not work. However, the rebels and the Libyan Transitional National Council who fought the regime were able to unite under the common goal of removing Gaddafi.

Second, violence there exceeded that which occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, and even in Bahrain. By the time violence had ended in October 2011, an organized, armed resistance had emerged. The resistance was upheld by an international coalition supporting it from the outside. Gaddafi made several appearances and statements through national media. He urged all Libyans to rise up and fight against these rebels, whom he considered traitors and villains, and in one instance called "greasy rats."<sup>131</sup> He spent several months moving from place to place, hiding and directing those forces that did remain loyal. Perhaps most notable is the fact that unlike other condemned leaders such as Egypt's Mubarak, who stepped down without much struggle, Gaddafi stayed to fight, was captured, and unceremoniously killed by an angry rebel force.

And third, there is some evidence that Al Qaeda had a presence among the rebel fighters in Libya. Libya was, after all, a source of hundreds of Al Qaeda fighters "desperately attempting to go to Iraq to join the Jihad there."<sup>132</sup> Pro Al Qaeda graffiti found in areas of fighting, as well as a few jihadist flags associated with Al Qaeda, have been discovered in the areas of violence and conflict. Gaddafi himself was at least under

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<sup>129</sup> Saskia van Genugten, "Libya After Gadhafi," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 63, no. 3 (2011): 63. DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2011.586190.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>131</sup> Ian Black, "Gaddafi Urges Violent Showdown and Tells Libya 'I'll Die a Martyr,'" *The Guardian*, February 22, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/22/muammar-gaddafi-urges-violent-showdown>.

<sup>132</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 106.

this impression when he accused the rebels of being supported by Al Qaeda during one of his many nationally broadcast rants.<sup>133</sup>

Further evidence of this belief in Al Qaeda's support to the uprisings is manifest in a letter from Gaddafi to President Obama. He writes, "as you know too well democracy and building of civil society cannot be achieved by means of missiles and aircraft, or by backing armed member of Al Qaeda in Benghazi."<sup>134</sup> According to his letter, two problems existed. One was the political and military involvement of NATO. The other was the "terror conducted by AlQaeda (sic) gangs that have been armed in some cities, and by force refused to allow people to go back to their normal life, and carry on with exercising their social people's power as usual."<sup>135</sup> This may be Gaddafi's attempt to explain the events in Libya as being perpetrated by Al Qaeda, but given the history of Libya as a source for willing fighters it is at least a plausible explanation.

## B. A WAR OF WORDS

Gaddafi was not the only one to use ideological rhetoric regarding Libya. Just as Al Qaeda spoke out about the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere, it also addressed the rebellion in Libya. Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri, its second in command at the time of the release of episode number 5 of "Inspire Magazine," praised the fighters in Libya who rebelled against Gaddafi's forces. He said:

Greetings to the grandsons of Omar al-Mukhtar — may Allah have mercy on him — who rose to challenge with their bare chests the viciousness and might of the Qadhafi regime and its crimes. I ask Allah to have mercy on their martyrs, heal their wounded, release their prisoners, and to grace them to support their religion and Ummah and protect their honors and dignities, and to grace them with His dear victory and near openness. The blood of the hundreds of martyrs al-Qadhafi's regime killed in your blessed revolution will not go to waste Allah-willing, and

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<sup>133</sup> Ian Black, "Gaddafi Urges Violent Showdown and Tells Libya 'I'll Die a Martyr,'" *The Guardian*, last modified February 22, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/22/muammar-gaddafi-urges-violent-showdown>

<sup>134</sup> Gus Lubin, "Qaddafi's Letter To Obama," *Business Insider*, last modified June 7, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/qaddafi-obama-letter-2011-4>

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

before them the hundreds he killed, and the suffering of the thousands he imprisoned and tortured.<sup>136</sup>

Although a seemingly customary salutation of praise, and denigration of Gaddafi, this greeting makes reference to Omar al-Mukhtar. Mukhtar was a famous Libyan national hero who fought against the Italians during the colonial period.

As rebel forces began to coalesce and grow, they frequently gave themselves colorful names. One of these brigades named itself the Omar Mukhtar brigade.<sup>137</sup> This salutation gives an ideological identity to the brigade by calling them the grandsons of this nationally revered fighter. It also appears to be a subtle move to co-opt the movement to Al Qaeda's cause. In a similar passage, Zawahiri tells the people of Libya that their "ancestors fought for the cause of Allah in order for faith to be all to Allah, so walk on their path, follow their trace, and be the best of descendants for the best of ancestors."<sup>138</sup> Zawahiri is making an appeal to the days of Muslim glory, comparing this struggle to those of the Libyan golden age before foreign armies occupied it and an apostate regime held power.

As Zawahiri's message continues, he calls upon Muslims, and especially Egypt, to come to the aid of the Libyans:

And here, I would like to encourage my brothers from the Egyptian people and especially the western desert tribes to support and back their brothers in Libya with money, medicine, food, and weapons, and to treat their wounded, and to fight along their side against this tyrant who corrupts faith and life.<sup>139</sup>

He calls upon the people of Egypt, who are heavily engaged in their own uprisings to support the Libyan struggle. This passage is not ideologically significant other than the

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<sup>136</sup> "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5," Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

<sup>137</sup> Graeme Smith, "Libyan Rebels Crack Down on Rogue Militias." *The Globe and Mail*, last modified June 6, 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/africa-mideast/libyan-rebels-crack-down-on-rogue-militias/article2115805/>.

<sup>138</sup> "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5," Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

fact that Zawahiri himself is from Egypt, with special ties to it. Additionally, Al Qaeda rallied similar support to Afghanistan in its long struggle against the Soviet Union throughout the 1980s. Unlike that period of time, support for Al Qaeda has diminished, and the people are not in a position to be of much assistance to any cause outside of their own. It is a request that is certain to go unheeded.

Zawahiri expends considerable effort in renouncing not only Gaddafi and his regime, but he reveals the objects of Al Qaeda's traditional ire:

Al-Qadhafi declares constantly that the continuity of his regime is guaranteed to stabilize the West, and including his declarations on March 9th that Libya's stability—and he means the stability of his regime in Libya—is a guarantee for the stability of the West and Europe and the so-called Israel, as he claims.<sup>140</sup>

In one sentence, he vilifies the three biggest enemies of Al Qaeda. The first and greatest enemy in Al Qaeda's eyes is the West, meaning the United States and all of its allies who are viewed as the Far Enemy. According to Zawahiri, if it were not for the Far Enemy, no apostate regime would be able to stand, especially the Gaddafi regime. The next enemy is this Near Enemy – Gaddafi's regime, the apostate regime that fails to uphold Sharia law. And finally, he cites Gaddafi's claim that his regime stabilizes Israel. The mention of Israel is significant. According to *Self Inflicted Wounds*:

Al-Qa'ida and its associated movements does not extend beyond a tiny minority of Muslims and Arabs, so the group aims to recruit new members in Gaza and beyond by adopting a more extremist line than Hamas. Attacking Israel would bestow on global jihadists far more glory and legitimacy than would additional strikes on Arab infidel governments.<sup>141</sup>

Mentioning Israel is sure to strike a chord among most Muslims, and doing so is another indicator of its growing need to find some means to appeal to the Arab world. However, this line of reasoning is irrelevant to the true concerns of the people of Libya.

Al Qaeda uses the unrest in Libya to advance its cause of hatred against the United States. Zawahiri states:

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Moghadam, Assaf, ed. *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within Al-Qa'ida and its Periphery* (West Point, NY: Harmony Project, 2010), 193.

And I warn our people in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and everywhere from the crocodile tears, which America sheds today over the miseries of the Libyans; as America is the last one that has right to speak about freedom and human rights and justice and protection of civilians. Why didn't America mobilize against al-Qadhafi before the uprising of the Libyans people? Wasn't America handing the prisoners to al-Qadhafi in its war on Islam under the name of 'terrorism,' in order to be tortured, beaten and killed? And from them—as we consider him—the martyr Sheikh Ibn al-Sheikh al-Liby, and from them leaders of Islamic fighting groups.<sup>142</sup>

With this passage, Al Qaeda seeks to drive a wedge between the rebels and the United States. This would be a futile attempt, since the U.S. support to the resistance was decisive and well-received. President Obama's initial response to Gaddafi's aggression toward the protests was outrage. On February 25, 2011, his administration reversed the U.S. policy of rapprochement and imposed financial sanctions against Gaddafi and other Libyan officials. It also blocked certain funds under U.S. jurisdiction and restricted personal financial transactions between U.S. citizens and specified Libyan individuals and entities. These sanctions were expanded a few weeks later.<sup>143</sup> Zawahiri also asks why the United States "didn't freeze the accounts of al-Qadhafi and his family before?"<sup>144</sup> This fails to take into account the U.S. policy of improved relations with Libya before the violence, however, as Gaddafi's regime turned violent toward the protests, the United States took immediate action. As the aggression continued, NATO began airstrikes directed at military units. These actions were much more than the claims of false concern that Zawahiri made against the U.S.. It is perhaps interesting to note that for the first time the United States and Al Qaeda had the same objective: unseating Gaddafi from power.

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<sup>142</sup> "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5," Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

<sup>143</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, "Libya: Unrest and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service Washington, D.C., p. 7.

<sup>144</sup> "Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5," Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

Zawahiri's statement makes reference to numerous events in U.S. history. He accuses the United States of hypocrisy regarding the killing of civilians by the Gaddafi regime. He states:

America, which accuses al-Qadhafi of killing civilians, has killed and is killing civilians everywhere; from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Iraq and Afghanistan, and from the most recent events killing 60 civilians, amongst them women and children, in Ghazi Abad village in Kunar province in February. And worse than killing them is the declaration by Petraeus' spokesman that the village people were the ones who had burned the corpses and mutilated them. Almost one week after the event the American jets killed 9 children in Kunar also, and Petraeus and Obama presented apologies to Karzai; a silly play between wolves and foxes.<sup>145</sup>

It is highly unlikely that references to Hiroshima and Nagasaki will resonate with any Muslim fighting in Libya. These took place many decades in the past and seem out of place in a discussion regarding the uprisings in the Middle East. The events regarding incidences of collateral damage in Afghanistan are more on point, as many young Libyan men have been found there supporting the jihad against the United States. The reference of jets killing children could have had some resonance if any major incidents of collateral damage occurred after NATO airstrikes commenced on March 19, 2011. There were no such incidents that Zawahiri could mention in this statement made later in April.

Al Qaeda once again declares that Sharia law is what it would like to see imposed in Libya after Gaddafi is removed from power. Zawahiri states:

I also call upon our people in Libya to be patient, steadfast and coalesced in order for their goal to be achieved by establishing a Muslim state in Libya, to rule by Sharia, bring Shura, spread justice, support the oppressed, and seek to liberate Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, and every occupied inch of the Muslim homelands.<sup>146</sup>

This is no surprise, since it has fought throughout the Muslim world to try to achieve this goal. It views any Western influence as a threat to the pious ideal of living under "God's Law." In every instance of speaking about the uprisings in the various countries, it has stressed this point. It is notable that Zawahiri suggests the Libyan people's goal in

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

overthrowing Gaddafi is for the express purpose of establishing Sharia law. Of note, he makes no mention of the evils of democracy, as he did quite pointedly in Egypt.

### C. BENGHAZI: AL QAEDA WEIGHS IN

Al Qaeda, through its prominent mouthpiece Ayman Zawahiri, issued a short statement regarding the recent attacks on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi. The statement does not deviate from that which it has said regarding the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Zawahiri continues to blame the United States for using its freedom of speech to offend the prophet Muhammed, and all the Muslim Ummah:

America, in the name of individual freedom and freedom of expression, has allowed the production of a film that is hostile to the kind messenger, prayer and peace upon him. But this individual freedom that the Americans boast about will not prohibit them from torturing the Muslim prisoners in Bagram, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and secret prisons.<sup>147</sup>

Just as in other countries, he renounces democratic principles and argues that the United States is hypocritical in espousing them, while inflicting pain and suffering on Muslims. The details of the attack are still emerging from this event, and it is unlikely that the video Zawahiri mentions was even viewed by as many people as were involved in the attacks. Yet, this does not prevent Al Qaeda from making an attempt at relevancy.

Within this statement, Zawahiri continues to stir up Muslim aggression toward the United States, using the well-known theme of its alliance with Israel. He reminds them that Islam is still at war with America:

We do not want to trick ourselves; we are facing a Crusader-Zionist war led by America, and in facing this war and defending the Muslim Ummah, the Mujahideen have launched the blessed campaign on New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> “Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri: In Support of the Messenger,” Flash Point Partners, last modified October 12, 2012, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hrc4ab-22support-for-the-messenger22-en.pdf>.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

This again seems to be drawing upon Al Qaeda's legacy of strength during the peak of its power. It shows that it has nothing new to offer and must rely on attacks it perpetrated over 10 years ago.

It seems that Al Qaeda's point is to seize upon an opportunity to inject itself into this event. If its central leadership had anything to do with it in the first place, it would have been in a better position to respond quickly and clearly to the attacks early on, instead of a month later. It praises the perpetrators of the attack:

Greetings to the honorable free ones protecting Islam, and [greetings] upon those who raided the American embassy in Benghazi, and the ones who protested in front of the American embassy in Cairo and downed its American flag and raised instead the flag of Islam and jihad. And I invite them to continue their confrontation with the American crusader-Zionist aggression on Islam and Muslims, and I invite the rest of Muslims to follow their lead.<sup>149</sup>

Al Qaeda follows its usual procedure of praise followed by an invitation to join in the struggle.

It may be considered no surprise that violent attacks occurred in Libya. It was the one country that experienced armed conflict in the removal of its dictator during the Arab Spring. It also is well known that over the years, Al Qaeda recruited fighters from Libya. What is to be made of the violent attacks? According to U.S. Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, the majority of the demonstrations occurring outside the consulate in Benghazi were focused on political radicalism. He said these people were generally seeking an outlet for pent-up frustrations, but that those who did attack were organized violent extremists.<sup>150</sup> Whatever the final reports may be, Al Qaeda seeks to gain relevancy by co-opting the events of and related to the Arab Spring.

#### **D. AL QAEDA MISSES THE MARK**

Al Qaeda's assumption that the people have a goal to institute Sharia law after Gaddafi is overthrown is an erroneous one. The Arab Spring in Libya took place for the

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, "Discussion on al Qaeda" (presentation at the U.S. State Department, Washington, D.C., September 19, 2011).

exact same reasons as in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and throughout the Middle East. Those reasons are economic opportunity, a stake in the government, and freedom from oppression by hostile dictators. In fact, his movement has nothing to do with Islam as Al Qaeda claims. The era of the military dictator appears to be coming to an end, and has been running on empty since the late 1960s. Libya was run by a “mafia family,” which replaced the nation state. Gaddafi and his family and inner circle controlled all national wealth and assets, and there was no outflow of resources from this group. As a result, the people there have lived in poverty and oppression for generations.<sup>151</sup> As the spirit of the Arab Spring spread through the Middle East and North Africa, there is little wonder that Gaddafi renounced the Tunisian uprisings. Given the conditions that existed in Libya, and the spirit of the uprisings occurring all around him, it was inevitable that his regime would fall.

It remains to be seen how the National Transition Council will organize into a government, and what kind of government will emerge. If some form of democracy materializes and succeeds in Libya, as well as throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Al Qaeda will diminish further.<sup>152</sup> If democracy fails, Al Qaeda will survive. Al Qaeda must realize this, given the rhetoric it uses in emphasizing the perils it attributes to democracy. If polling data from Tunisia and Egypt are any indication, it is unlikely that the people of Libya will accept a form of government resembling the kind of Sharia law that Al Qaeda espouses. It is difficult to tell whether Al Qaeda recognizes that the people want a representative form of government and ignores this fact, or if it fails to understand the true motivations behind the Arab Spring. Either way, this is clear evidence that Al Qaeda has little interest or ability to adjust its rhetoric to appeal to Muslims in Libya and throughout the Arab world.

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<sup>151</sup> Fawaz Gerges, “Drivers of the Awakenings.” (presentation, U.S. Army War College Arab Spring Symposium, Carlisle, Penn., January 30–31 2012).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

## V. WHAT ABOUT BAHRAIN?

When much of the Arab world was in the throes of social and regime change, Bahrain's Shia majority was undergoing its own struggle against a Sunni dominated monarchy. On February 14, 2011, two days after the uprisings on the streets of Cairo, police opened fire on the funeral procession for Ali Abdulhadi Mushaima. The people chanted slogans "calling for a new constitution, a democratically elected government, and an end to anti-Shia discrimination in the Sunni-ruled island kingdom."<sup>153</sup> The protests were preceded by the use of social media and the Internet as in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. Punctuating their grievances, the Bahrain royal family welcomed Saudi military forces, which were sent to help quell the uprisings. After a month of violence against an unarmed movement, government forces destroyed the Pearl Roundabout, the epicenter of the protests. While Al Qaeda was busy with public messaging about the Arab Spring, it fell silent when it came to protests in majority-Shi'a Bahrain. This chapter argues that AQ's virulent hostility to Shi'ism undermines the integrity of the organization by making AQ seem hypocritical about which popular Arab protests are good and which are not.

These grievances are a continuation of a decades-long history of conflict in Bahrain beginning with the country's independence from Britain in 1971. Initially, the Emir Issa Ben Salman Bin Khalifa "approved a constitution allowing elected parliament (74% were elected and about 26% were appointed by the Emir)."<sup>154</sup> This promptly ended when he dissolved it shortly thereafter, alluding to fears of sectarian strife with the 70% Shia majority. The next few decades saw the government of Bahrain impose subordination against the Shia using a combined policy of repression and discrimination.<sup>155</sup> Reforms were attempted several times over the years. The most

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<sup>153</sup> Ian Black, "Bahrain Police Open Fire on Funeral Procession Leaving One Dead," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2011. Accessed May 12 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/15/bahrain-police-funeral-procession>.

<sup>154</sup> Lamis Andoni, "Bahrain's Contribution to the Arab Spring," *Al Jazeera English*, 30 AUG 2011. Accessed May 12, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/08/20118301473301296.html>.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

recent attempt was with the National Action Charter in 2001, which was approved in a referendum by 98.4% of voters. This charter would establish a constitutional monarchy, but it was ignored by the newly crowned King Hamad Ben Issa Al Khalifa.

On May 3, 2012, King Hamad endorsed new “Constitutional Amendments, approved earlier by the Shura and Representative Councils.”<sup>156</sup> These amendments were rejected by the Bahraini opposition societies stating that they are “meaningless and have added nothing to Bahrain’s political life. They are a false media make-up hiding a very tyrannical reality.”<sup>157</sup> In a dignified response, Ikhaa Secretary Mousa Ansari emphasized their continued resolve to take a peaceful approach to rallies, demonstrations and public activities regardless of how brutal the security forces deal with them.

Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the Arab Spring in Bahrain has not resulted in significant or meaningful change for the Shia populace. Even though the grievances toward the regime have revolved around the same issues of fair representation, equal rights, participation in government, and economic opportunity, some feel that the Bahrain uprisings have been portrayed as a sectarian issue. It is perceived that the media has largely ignored the seriousness and severity of the brutality of the government toward its people.<sup>158</sup> Not only has the world media tended to downplay the contribution and significance of Bahrain to the Arab Spring, so has Al Qaeda. In fact, it is notably silent.

#### A. THE SILENCE OF AL QAEDA

Al Qaeda, which has encouraged the Muslim Ummah to participate in the ousting of apostate regimes throughout the Middle East, has made no known mention of the unrest in Bahrain. These uprisings took place concurrently with those in Egypt and elsewhere. Is this a coincidence, since many influential clerics have declared Egypt as

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<sup>156</sup> “HM King Hamad Endorses Constitutional Amendments.” *Bahrain News Agency*, 3 MAY 2012, accessed May 12, 2012, <http://bna.bh/portal/en/news/506764>.

<sup>157</sup> “Opposition Groups Decry Bahraini King’s ‘Meaningless’ Constitutional Amendments,” *Open Source Center*, accessed May 12, 2012, <https://www.opensource.gov/public/content/login/fcc>.

<sup>158</sup> Lamis Andoni, “Bahrain’s Contribution to the Arab Spring,” *Al Jazeera English*, 30 AUG 2011. Accessed May 12, 2012,

the most important nation within the Middle East?<sup>159</sup> Is it safe to assume that Al Qaeda views the events in Bahrain as equally important and significant within the larger picture of the Arab Spring? The answer is a resounding no. Its taciturn nature regarding the events in Bahrain is deliberate.

Al Qaeda's silence on this matter is important to investigate. Since there is no available rhetoric to examine regarding Bahrain, its historical proclamation and available statements about Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other countries will highlight its dilemma. This analysis will reveal that Al Qaeda continues to view the Arab Spring through a religious lens, that it is torn between supporting a popular uprising by Shia Muslims or condemning an apostate regime, and that its message has failed to resonate with Muslim audiences.

## B. HATRED OF THE SHIA

Although its focus has been primarily on fighting the “Far Enemy,” consisting of the United States and its Western allies, its leaders and key ideologues have mentioned their hostility toward the Shia minority. Abu Musab al-Suri, in his major treatise, “The Call to Global Islamic Resistance,” has this to say about them:

The Issue of Shiite and Other Non-Sunni Groups: Jihadists consider all these groups part of the Islamic nation as part of the groups mentioned in the Hadith, which informed us that the nation will be divided into seventy-three groups with one granted salvation (that is the Sunni group) and the rest in hellfire. They consider them misguided and deviants.<sup>160</sup>

Long before the Arab Spring, Al-Suri’s anti-Shia sentiment penetrated the thinking of Jihadists everywhere throughout the Middle East, and Al Qaeda is no exception.

Surprisingly, there are nearly no references made by Osama bin-Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri to the Shia sect before 2003.<sup>161</sup> However, with the invasion of Iraq by U.S forces, this issue was pushed to the forefront in a bloody sectarian struggle lead

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<sup>159</sup> “Exclusive: Transcript of Qaradawi’s Speech in Cairo,” Translating Jihad, last modified March 7, 2011, <http://www.translatingjihad.com/2011/03/exclusive-transcript-of-qaradawis.html>

<sup>160</sup> Jim Lacey, ed. *A Terrorist’s Call to Global Jihad*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 161.

<sup>161</sup> Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, *Self-Inflicted Wounds* (Combating Terrorism Center: West Point, 2010), 62.

by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi, of Jordan, leader of al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, formally changed the name of his group to “al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers,” and declared his allegiance to bin-Laden. Bin Laden publicly endorsed Zarqawi and appointed him his deputy, representing Al Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>162</sup> Zarqawi’s goal was to “kill as many Iraqis, particularly Shiites, as possible, triggering an all-out sectarian war between the two leading communities – Sunni Arabs and Shiites – which he almost single-handedly brought about.”<sup>163</sup>

This violent period from 2004 to 2006 had a disastrous impact on Al Qaeda. The magnitude of the brutality had the opposite effect that bin-Laden had hoped to achieve. Support and sympathy for Al Qaeda’s cause diminished rapidly. Even Zarqawi’s mentor, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, admonished him for his indiscriminate suicide attacks on ordinary Shia. Zawahiri, in an intercepted letter to Zarqawi said to him:

My opinion is that this matter won’t be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue. Indeed, questions will circulate among mujahideen circles and their opinion makers about the correctness of this conflict with the Shia at this time. Is it something that is unavoidable? And if the attacks on Shia leaders were necessary to put a stop to their plans, then why were there attacks on ordinary Shia?<sup>164</sup>

Zawahiri’s words indicate that perhaps the timing was not right for attacks against the Shia. Could there be a better time? The effect of Zarqawi’s violence in Iraq was catastrophic toward Al Qaeda. After the death of Zarqawi, Bin-Laden offered a public apology for the actions of his men toward the Shia populace, asking for tolerance and forgiveness.<sup>165</sup>

The issue between Al Qaeda and the Shia populace in the Middle East continues today. When asked in an interview for “Inspire” magazine, why the Houthi Shia are

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<sup>162</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 107.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 107

<sup>164</sup> Moghadam, Assaf, ed. *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within Al-Qa’ida and its Periphery* (West Point, NY: Harmony Project, 2010), 218.

<sup>165</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 110.

targeted, Shaykh Abu Hurairah, military commander of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), said:

It is because they involved themselves in the adoption of the American project, which consists of tracking and going after al-Qaeda. Additionally, they have expanded inside the territories of ahl as-sunnah, and as a result their actions have led to the humiliation of some [Muslims]. It even reached the point where they assassinated some of the Imam's of a Sunni Masjid as well as arrested two brothers from amongst ours of whom are Mashoor al-Ahdal and Hussain at-Tais and then handing them over to Ali Salih's regime in exchange for 10 million Yemeni Riyals.<sup>166</sup>

This interview took place in the spring of 2011, at the height of the Arab uprisings, and highlights the deeply seated bigotry of Al Qaeda against the Shia Muslim community. Its inability to lend the same encouragement to the Shia of Bahrain is perfectly clear. It is at war with them.

### C. A CONFLICTED AL QAEDA

Al Qaeda's reticence to support the people of Bahrain demonstrates a problem with the consistency of its message. The kingdom of Bahrain would surely qualify as an apostate regime, just as the regimes of Mubarak in Egypt, and Ben Ali of Tunisia are apostate regimes, of which Al Qaeda has made numerous statements. Zawahiri has spent much of his life speaking out against the apostate regimes extant in Egypt over the years. In a statement released on April 14, 2011, Zawahiri wishes "congratulations to the Egyptian people and all the Arab and Muslims (sic) people, and even all the free ones in life, for the departure of the arrogant tyrant Hosni Mubarak."<sup>167</sup> He offers the following support:

To the Muslim Ummah in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Algeria and Jordan, the Mujahideen are with you, they affirm you in your outrage and uprising, and they are fighting on your side in one battle against America in its Crusader campaign and against her agents, and each victory for the

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<sup>166</sup> "Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri: In Support of the Messenger," Flash Point Partners, last modified October 12, 2012, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22support-for-the-messenger22-en.pdf>.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

Mujahideen is but power to you for the sake of reforms and change toward victory of the Ummah against dependency, tyranny and corruption.<sup>168</sup>

His condolences and praise to the Ummah in Bahrain is non-existent, even though the actions of the king of Bahrain could be considered every bit as tyrannical as those found in Egypt.

Osama bin-Laden, a Saudi, and Al Qaeda's ideological founder, declared the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a significant enemy and cause of the problems throughout the Muslim world. In an interview with CNN, he declared:

Regarding the criticisms of the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula, the first one is their subordination to the US. So, our main problem is the US government while the Saudi regime is but a branch or an agent of the US. By being loyal to the US regime, the Saudi regime has committed an act against Islam.<sup>169</sup>

Bahrain bears a striking resemblance to Saudi Arabia in this respect: It is both a kingdom, and a significant supporter and beneficiary of the United States. It is the home of the U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Naval Fleet and the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, located in Juffair. By Al Qaeda's own definition, this fact is a key element of its declared hatred toward regimes it opposes.

Even though it has praised the uprisings and desires of the people in ousting these regimes, it fails to offer words that address the cause of the revolutions. The people are eager to enjoy the human rights, economic opportunity, and especially a true and legitimate democracy. At no time in the past or present have the leaders of Al Qaeda advocated a representative form of government. Zawahiri makes this position clear:

As you can see, my dear Muslim Brother, democracy is based on the principle of the power of the creatures over other creatures, and rejects the principle of God's absolute power over all creatures; it is also based on the idea that men's desires, whatever they may be, replace God absolutely, and on the refusal to obey God's law.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, ed. *Al Qaeda In Its Own Words* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 187.

Al Qaeda has never wavered from this point of view that to have a democratic form of government subordinates the law of God to the man-made laws of the men. After Egypt had successfully overthrown the Mubarak regime, Al Qaeda continued to push its rhetoric of the Muslim caliphate. Zawahiri in his message to the people of Egypt calls “upon the needy, deserving people in Egypt to demand that the Egyptian government to rule with Sharia, which give them [needy] the right for Zakat.”<sup>171</sup> Al Qaeda’s description of Shari law, though popular with some Muslims, does not appeal to the vast majority. The desire of the people of Bahrain is for a democracy, just as the people of Egypt.

#### **D. AL QAEDA’S REASONING**

One counter argument for the justification behind Al Qaeda’s decision to remain silent toward Bahrain is that it still feels the impact of Zarqawi’s atrocious campaign toward the Shia in Iraq. In the eyes of many Muslims, it is strongly viewed as a radical sectarian movement that is not considered a true defender of Islam. Most Sunnis do not share its hatred for the Shia.<sup>172</sup> This, therefore, represents a significant flaw in its ideology. Stating support to the people of Bahrain, however, need not be a sectarian issue, and it could perhaps achieve greater gains by appealing to those issues they do hold in common. It has yet again committed a serious blunder by not doing so, and its opportunity to garner positive support from the Shia population is past. It has shown its inability to act rationally in its own interest by placing the singular issue of sectarianism above the secular.

Bahrain as a nation has distinctive similarities to the other nations of the Arab Spring. First it is a kingdom, and in Al Qaeda’s eyes would qualify as an apostate regime. Second, it does not rule with Sharia law. And third, it has significant ties to the U.S., provides strategic assistance, and in return receives benefit from it. On these grounds alone, Al Qaeda could justify itself in denouncing this regime as it did the others,

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<sup>171</sup> “Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, Episode 5,” Flash Point Partners, last modified April 14, 2011, [https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint\\_zawahir0411.pdf](https://flashpointintel.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_zawahir0411.pdf) November 27, 2011.

<sup>172</sup> Moghadam, Assaf, ed. *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within Al-Qa’ida and its Periphery* (West Point, NY: Harmony Project, 2010), 223.

and still remain consistent with its own ideology. In addition to this, the people of Bahrain are similar to the people of the other nations revolting against their governments. They want freedom, democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity. The people of Bahrain have suffered under its regime for a long time, and been attacked as they sought political change by nonviolent means. Al Qaeda has missed out on a golden opportunity to co-opt the people of this country to its cause, and it will continue its decline if it fails to find a message that resonates with the people.

## **VI. CONCLUSION: TENETS OF TERRORISM**

The Arab Spring represents a strategic crossroads for Al Qaeda and its affiliates. It occurred at a time following significant defeats to AQ across the globe. The U.S. inflicted casualties, diminishing its numbers, and most significantly, driving it from its safe haven in Afghanistan. The Arab Spring is both a challenge and an opportunity for Al Qaeda to regain the support it has lost over the past several years, if the organization can succeed in reconnecting with a Muslim target audience. To date, however, Al Qaeda's rhetoric has failed to offer any new themes or ideas that appear to appeal to the Muslim Ummah. It has continued to adhere to the same dated ideas it has upheld since its inception: Islam is under attack; the Far Enemy remains the greatest threat to Muslims, Israel still disgraces Jerusalem, Muslims are obligated to participate in violent Jihad, Muslims need to rededicate themselves to the cause of defending the holy lands, and the caliphate is the ultimate goal. These themes largely fail to resonate within the context of the Arab Spring.

The people living in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain had different concerns than those relentlessly expressed by Al Qaeda. In Tunisia, the greatest motivator for the uprising was economic opportunity. People there were willing to burn themselves to death to demonstrate their determination. In Egypt, the people wanted the "pharaoh," Hosni Mubarak, and his oppressive regime gone. They were unwilling to resort to violence, which would have given the regime the justification it needed to use force to suppress the uprisings. In Libya, the people were unwilling to live under a ruthless dictator and his "mafia family." They did use force to overthrow this regime because unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, Gaddafi did not step down "willingly," or with the army's encouragement. In Bahrain, although there was no regime change, the Shia majority demonstrated its willingness to suffer at the hands of the king and the security forces he brought in from Saudi Arabia. They demanded constitutional reforms that would guarantee them freedoms but have found their goals to be lofty for now.

In all of these countries, the people were looking for economic opportunities, civil and human rights, a voice in government, and greater self-determination. Yes, polls

show that Muslims want to live piously, with Islam as an included element to their government, but they would rather live in a democracy.<sup>173</sup> Al Qaeda's statements to the people in these countries demonstrate that it has not sufficiently noted the concerns of the people. If it has, it does not take heed. This study has revealed a number of observations.

## A. OBSERVATIONS

**How does Al Qaeda view the Arab Spring?** Although the causes of the uprisings seem to pose a threat to its long-term survival, AQ itself views the Arab Spring as an opportunity. In the words of U.S- born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, Al Qaeda views it with “glee.” He said that even if the government that emerges was not Islamic, Muslims would still have the chance to be “breathe free after three decades of suffocation.”<sup>174</sup> Its long-time goal of defeating the tyrannical apostate regime was achieved, but not through any contribution of its own. The problem for Al Qaeda is just that: It had no part in it. What Al Qaeda sought to achieve over the course of years through violence and ideology was achieved in a matter of months in Libya, and in only a few weeks in Tunisia and Egypt. Its attitude of optimism reveals its lack of understanding or concern for what the people in the Middle East struggled to attain in the first place. For it, the Arab Spring represents a point of decision. It can continue to alienate itself from the Ummah with its abrasive rhetoric, or it can adjust its agenda to one that is more moderate, and that may generate greater appeal. The Arab Spring represents more of a crisis for Al Qaeda than an opportunity as it rushes to get its message out and attuned to the sentiment of the Ummah.

**What type of government does Al Qaeda wish to see instituted in place of the “apostate regimes?”** The short answer is that it wants none. What it does want is an Islamic caliphate that will institute the top down version of Sharia law that governs all aspects of Muslim life. It stated this ideal from its inception in the 1990s, and continues

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<sup>173</sup> “Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life,” Pew Research Center, last modified July 10, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/07/10/most-muslims-want-democracy-personal-freedoms-and-islam-in-political-life/>.

<sup>174</sup> “(Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s ‘Inspire’ Magazine)-Anwar al-Awlaki: ‘The Tsunami of Change,’ last modified March 29, 2011 <http://info.publicintelligence.net/InspireMarch2011.pdf>

to do so today. It has two problems though. One is that it provides no roadmap of how the people should install the caliphate, now that the old regimes are gone. And two, poll after poll has shown that the people do not want a caliphate.<sup>175</sup> Yes, the people want to live piously as Muslims. They want in many cases to have Islam implemented to varying degrees within their respective governments. This is especially true with Islamists, who are strict practitioners. But generally, Muslims do not want Islam to rule their lives from the top down.<sup>176</sup>

Even if the people were inclined to want a caliphate, Al Qaeda lacks a plan on how to make this a reality. It is focused on the violent removal of the Far Enemy and the modern day “pharaohs.” Its only suggestion is to take up arms, as it recommended to Tunisians. Who exactly are the Tunisians supposed to fight? Ben Ali fled, taking refuge in Saudi Arabia. Free and fair elections are underway in Tunisia and in other countries. Fresh violence would do less to further the goals of the people than to freely join the political process they have earned through their sacrifices. The future of these countries is certainly unclear, and Al Qaeda’s messages seem to be contributing to, instead of reducing the chaos. It offers no proposal outlining how to proceed from a state of governmental collapse to the Islamic caliphate it prefers.

**If Al Qaeda prefers a caliphate, what type of government do most Muslims wish to see in their countries?** They want some form of representative democracy that gives them basic individual freedoms and economic opportunity and independence.<sup>177</sup> Again, polls taken in 2006 have shown this trend years before the Arab Spring ever took place.<sup>178</sup> This is a tremendous problem for Al Qaeda because it has continually spoken

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<sup>175</sup> “Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life,” Pew Research Center, last modified July 10, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/07/10/most-muslims-want-democracy-personal-freedoms-and-islam-in-political-life/>.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam* (New York: Gallup, Inc., 2007), 34–35.

out in the strongest possible terms against the principles of democracy. According to it, democracy is diametrically opposed to Sharia law.<sup>179</sup> Democracy places man's law above God's law.

This places Al Qaeda directly against the people that it needs for support as a terrorist organization. Before the collapse of the dictatorial regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, Al Qaeda and the people had a common enemy: the dictator himself. Now that the people have removed these dictators, with no assistance from Al Qaeda, what could motivate the people to join with it? The people have made it clear, especially in Tunisia, that they are not willing to submit to a regime such as Ben Ali's which deprives them of the freedoms they desire.

Unfortunately for Al Qaeda, the vision of the people does not reflect its vision of the future. It repeatedly renounces democratic principles, both before and during the Arab Spring. These are the principles that the people want, and are determined to get. As Al Qaeda continues to attempt to impose its views on the people, the more difficulty it will have in finding support. It seems the Arab world has changed, but Al Qaeda has not.

**What are Al Qaeda's likely actions in the future?** Al Qaeda will continue to adhere to the ideology and rhetoric it displayed during the Arab Spring. The numerous defeats it suffered in nearly every location it attempted to gain strength and influence have not resulted in any deviation from its ideology. The Arab Spring did not motivate its leaders to alter its message. On its present course, it will have to be more reactive, rather than proactive in crafting its messages to prevail over world events. Its store of fresh ideas appears to be bankrupt. As long as key leaders and other ideologues such as Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri remain alive and in charge, there will likely be no change to this.

Al Qaeda as an organization will continue to manifest itself in groups and affiliates such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). These affiliates will maintain similar, though not always the same

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<sup>179</sup> "Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri: In Support of the Messenger," Flash Point Partners, last modified October 12, 2012, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hrc4ab-22support-for-the-messenger22-en.pdf>

goals and rhetoric. This is evident in the slightly different tone of moderation in the message of Zawahiri of Al Qaeda Central to the Egyptians, compared to the tone of Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, leader of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Zawahiri suggested that Muslims could potentially live peacefully (or that they had in the past), with non-Muslims in a similar manner that Yusuf Qaradawi suggested to Egyptians. Wadoud, on the other hand, boldly invited Tunisians to send its sons to take up arms and receive military training from them. These two invitations from leaders in associated franchises appear to suggest two completely opposite courses of action for the people. One is peaceful and the other violent. This is not to say that Zawahiri has changed his goal of violent jihad, but it illustrates that inconsistency in messaging and objectives within the group and its affiliates exists. It may also indicate that Al Qaeda Central is in no condition to accept new recruits in the way AQIM claims to be. Fracturing among and between Al Qaeda affiliates will continue to be a challenge.

The concept of jihad against the Far Enemy will likely remain a tenet of Al Qaeda's ideology as well as that of any affiliated network. This idea is what sets Al Qaeda apart from most other terrorist organizations that concentrate their efforts against the "near enemy," Israel, or other perceived enemies. As long as the United States is viewed as a meddler in the affairs of the Middle East, there will always be violent extremists who are willing to adopt its name and ideology.

Al Qaeda is an attractive organization to be associated with because of its widespread notoriety. It will likely be a "deadly nuisance" for many years to come, in that it will maintain an ability to conduct attacks of a relatively small scale against a wide variety of vulnerable targets around the world.<sup>180</sup> It will, of course, continue to take responsibility for high profile attacks like those on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. There always will be the threat of the "lone wolf" attack as well. Lone wolves are those who will self-radicalize and adopt the Al Qaeda name, conducting attacks of their own accord, but they will not necessarily represent the views and goals of those such as Wadoud and Zawahiri who speak for the organization. The lone wolf's contribution to Al Qaeda will

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<sup>180</sup> Glenn Robinson, "Jihadi Information Operations" (class lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Calif., December 8, 2011).

be welcome as long as such an individual's actions can be linked in some way as opposing the United States or the West. This type of attack in small numbers will not likely indicate a significant resurgence of Al Qaeda. Not until the key ideologues are killed or captured, and not replaced, will Al Qaeda fade as a major terrorist network.

**What evidence is there that Al Qaeda has not managed to achieve relevancy in the Arab Spring?** The nature of the uprisings in the Middle East were popular, mostly non-violent demonstrations. With few exceptions, such as Libya, government forces clashed with demonstrators who were unarmed. Had the people chosen to take up weapons, the regimes could have justified the use of force. This conscious decision to avoid violent retaliation lent credibility to the uprisings. Al Qaeda's messaging failed to persuade the people to stage violent revolts. In the case of Libya, Gaddafi refused to relinquish power. His words and actions were openly hostile to not only those of his own country who peacefully opposed him, but to Muslims in Tunisia who opposed Ben Ali. Unlike Ben Ali and Mubarak, he made no effort to portray the appearance of a legitimate government leader. He was an open dictator who called his people "greasy rats," and an international coalition giving support to Libyan fighters legitimized his overthrow. This action was not influenced by any words of Al Qaeda. Ultimately, AQ's rhetoric did not have any significant bearing on the actions of Muslims in the Arab Spring. The protests were of their own accord.

Free and fair elections have taken place in Tunisia, Egypt, and even Libya. The people seem to be intent on capitalizing on the ouster of the old regimes in these countries. If Al Qaeda had achieved influence in these countries, the people would renounce democracy and its attendant attributes, such as the electoral process. Certainly, they would not participate. Instead, Muslims are participating in these elections in record numbers. They are intent on having a hand on the future of their countries. Additionally, though many Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood hold numerous seats in governmental offices, no caliphates are emerging. It would seem that there would be more demand for such a government if Al Qaeda's messaging were gaining influence.

Further evidence that Al Qaeda's narrative holds no greater sway after the Arab Spring is that it does not have new safe havens. Al Qaeda Central leadership still remains

hidden in the Afghan/Pakistan border region. Affiliated groups find refuge in such countries as Yemen and Somalia. It has no new areas in Tunisia and Egypt. These countries represent areas where the people are intent on participating in the political process, rather than a violent extremist route to legitimate government. Libya has experienced a great deal of unrest in the time since Gaddafi was killed. Zawahiri praised the September 2012 death of a U.S. ambassador in Benghazi at the hands of Islamic militants. The details of that attack are still forthcoming, but Al Qaeda claims responsibility. This is another example of the antagonistic rhetoric directed toward the Far Enemy. It remains to be seen if Libya will become a new area open to Al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda continues to suffer defeat after defeat. U.S. Special Operations took down Osama bin-Laden in October 2012. Anwar al-Awlaki and others were killed in successful drone strikes in various places. Zawahiri remains in hiding. Al Qaeda has not repeated a major attack like those on Sept. 11, and it will unlikely be able to do that in the future. Attacks will continue, but Al Qaeda seems to have lost its capability to gather widespread support and sympathy. Though many Muslims may look on the United States and the West with disdain, Al Qaeda's call to jihad against the Far Enemy has not successfully resonated with the Ummah.

The countries of the Middle East and North Africa continue to evolve and reform. Successful democratic elections are taking place and governments are forming that work to balance rights with beliefs. The outcome of these “revolutions” remains to be seen and will likely take a generation or more to be resolved, just as they have for the countries of the former Soviet Union. Muslims continue to seek economic and political freedom and rights. All of this indicates that Al Qaeda is unable to reclaim the strength it held on Sept. 11, and it has not achieved the relevancy it seeks.

## **B. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY**

The United States should maintain a moderate level of vigilance toward Al Qaeda and its affiliates. It is important to recognize that it and other terrorist organizations are drawn to parts of the world, such as Yemen and Somalia, that are experiencing varying degrees of state failure. Countries that experience difficulty in maintaining the rule of

law within their borders are susceptible to extremist groups looking to set up training and recruitment camps. These areas are attractive, as a nation-state that cannot enforce law and order is ripe for terrorist activity.

The porous and ungoverned border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan certainly qualifies as a potential refuge, especially as the security situation fluctuates. This condition provides it with the safe havens it needs to train, organize and launch attacks throughout the world. Additionally, this region and others sometimes have sympathetic elements in the population. In Pakistan, polls showed that confidence in Osama bin-Laden was as high as 52% in 2005, and a low of 21% just before his death in 2011. At the same time, Al Qaeda reached a low favorability rating of 13%, with 55% of the population viewing it unfavorably. Thirty-one percent offered no opinion.<sup>181</sup> The reality is that this border region is traditionally difficult to govern and control, and has a history of providing support in varying degrees to Al Qaeda. It may be a problem area for counterterrorist efforts for some time.

A significant tool of U.S. diplomacy that could have an effect on Al Qaeda's narrative is public messaging. The U.S. should implement information policies that negate Al Qaeda's efforts to achieve credibility. One of its greatest strengths as a terrorist network is the "mileage" it has been able to get from the attacks on 9/11. The United States should emphasize that AQ has been eradicated from Afghanistan and that Osama bin-Laden and other senior leaders are defeated. Remaining leaders are in hiding, and it is simply a matter of time until these are captured, killed, or marginalized. Information planners should acknowledge that Al Qaeda at this point seeks to use its legacy as a source of strength and credibility. It has not had a spectacular attack like those on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon since 2001. It has succeeded in making headlines for attacks in places like London and Madrid, but these have been few and far between.

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<sup>181</sup> "On Anniversary of bin Laden's Death, Little Backing of Al Qaeda," Pew Research Center, last modified April 30, 2012. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/04/30/on-anniversary-of-bin-ladens-death-little-backing-of-al-qaeda/>.

On some level, the United States needs to communicate less about Al Qaeda. There always will be attacks committed by the lone wolf, and these types of attacks should be reported as such. Every time the name Al Qaeda is mentioned, it gains more credibility. The United States and its allies should seek to undermine the attacks that occur by countering the message in the media and presenting an alternate narrative. The United States should seek to present Al Qaeda as the organization it is: insignificant and operating from a position of weakness. The less media presence AQ seizes, the better.

Al Qaeda reveals its vulnerabilities through its inconsistencies. Inconsistencies, such as those found among and between groups like AQ central and AQIM, should be exploited. Also, highlighting statements that appear to be taken from a popular leader such as Yusuf Qaradawi will expose Al Qaeda as an organization with no new ideas to offer. This will show that it is operating from a position of weakness, further undermine its message, and discourage potential recruits from joining it.

The United States should emphasize discrepancies not only between AQ leader statements, but also between statements past and present. In the case of the Arab Spring, the United States could show that al Qaeda is changing to accommodate the times for the sole purpose of gaining support. As such, it should be portrayed as untrustworthy, an organization that simply changes what it says to fit what it thinks people want to hear. Messaging should draw attention to the fact that AQ is losing support and its rhetoric is not resonating with the people.

U.S. messaging should be used as part of an information campaign in concert with other tools of hard and soft power aimed at defeating Al Qaeda. The news media, both domestic and international, often fail to portray AQ as an organization in decline. Stories within the 24-hour news cycle often focus on the kinetic operations against it, and regularly inflate the threat AQ poses to the world. Stories featuring precision strikes should emphasize not only the success of the operation, but the inevitable collapse Al Qaeda faces in the not-so distant future.

Finally, the United States should support and encourage the Muslim Ummah as it seeks to achieve democratic forms of government. Polls show their preference to many

American ideals.<sup>182</sup> As these governments emerge, the United States should assist building government institutions that contribute to stability, legitimacy, and effectiveness. It should do so, however, in a quiet, behind-the-scenes manner by supporting native voices in the region that share its message. This way, it will not be seen as meddling in the affairs of the Middle East.

### C. REMAINING QUESTIONS AND AREAS OF FURTHER STUDY

This study examined the rhetoric of Al Qaeda regarding the Arab Spring to determine what it said and how it reacted. With time, details and revelations about the effects of the Arab Spring will emerge and become clearer. These revelations will provide the answers to some of the following questions: What countries and percentages of their populations agree most with Al Qaeda's messaging? What are the levels of stability in countries in the Middle East two, five, and 10 years after the Arab Spring that could become potential safe havens for Al Qaeda? What countries have implemented Sharia law and to what degree? Will powerful organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood adopt the caliphate and impose it on the people? What will the people do if the government cannot deliver on its promises, and how will this affect the influence Al Qaeda has on them?

As these questions are answered, a more detailed examination of U.S. policy can proceed. How much in the way of money and resources should the United States dedicate to the eradication of Al Qaeda? What is the realistic threat Al Qaeda poses to the U.S., given its influence and activities in the Middle East and the world at large? What new terrorist organizations are emerging in the wake of the Arab Spring, and how does Al Qaeda compare to them? How can the United States minimize the Al Qaeda's presence in the United States and international news media? The research will become more defined in the coming years.

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<sup>182</sup> "Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life," Pew Research Center, last modified July 10, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/07/10/most-muslims-want-democracy-personal-freedoms-and-islam-in-political-life/>

#### D. CLOSING THOUGHTS

The long-term outcome of the Arab Spring remains to be seen. Some speculate that Al Qaeda will thrive in this environment of chaos. In countries such as Libya, Al Qaeda claims responsibility for the attacks on the consulate in Benghazi. Is it gaining a safe haven there, one year after the Arab Spring? There is a difference between violence that is inspired, or directed by Al Qaeda, and the violence that recently occurred in Libya. It may gain traction in this country if the people are unable to establish a government that can maintain security. But for the most part, the people would rather have a country that offers the kind of economic opportunities and personal freedoms found in liberal democracies. This does not mean that these countries are immune from violence and unrest now that the “apostate” regimes are removed. On the contrary, as sitting officials struggle to make good on promises, and expectations are not met, there will be turmoil. These challenges will take many years to resolve. If democracy does fail, then Al Qaeda’s words will gain legitimacy, however, unrest should not by itself be an indicator that democracy is failing.

In light of the Arab Spring, Al Qaeda has failed to follow its own advice. According to Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri:

We cannot blame the community for not responding or not doing enough without blaming ourselves for the time when we failed to seize the opportunity to communicate clearly or to show compassion and sacrifice. The jihad movement must enable the Muslim community to participate with it in the jihad, and believers will participate only if the mujahedeen’s slogans are comprehensible.<sup>183</sup>

Perhaps Al Qaeda would not find itself outside the Arab Spring if its communications with the Muslim Ummah had been more in keeping with its own rhetoric.

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<sup>183</sup> *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words*. Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2008), 196.

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